Mushoku Tensei

jobless rein ation

NOVEL
26

Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote

Illustrated by
Shirotaka

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jobless reincarnation

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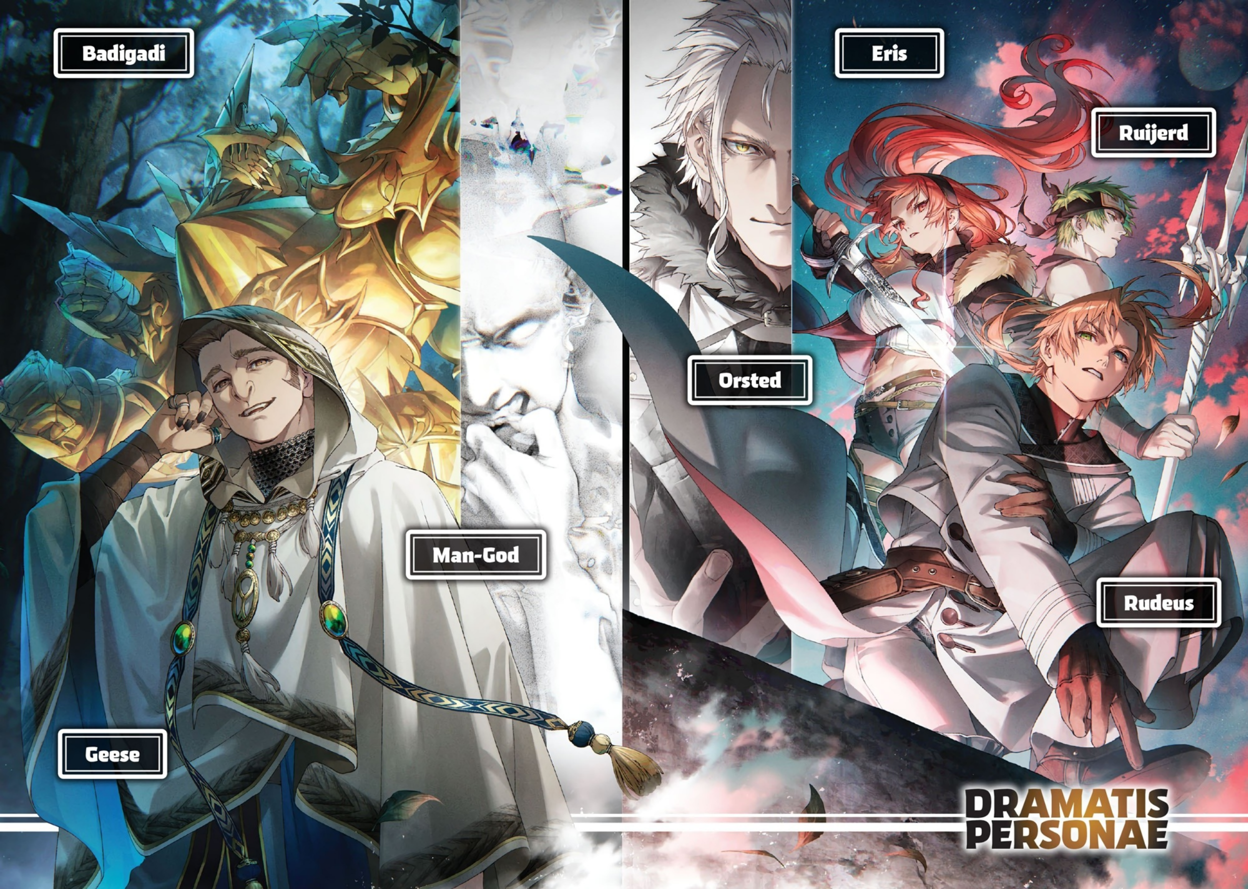
DRAMATIS PERSONAE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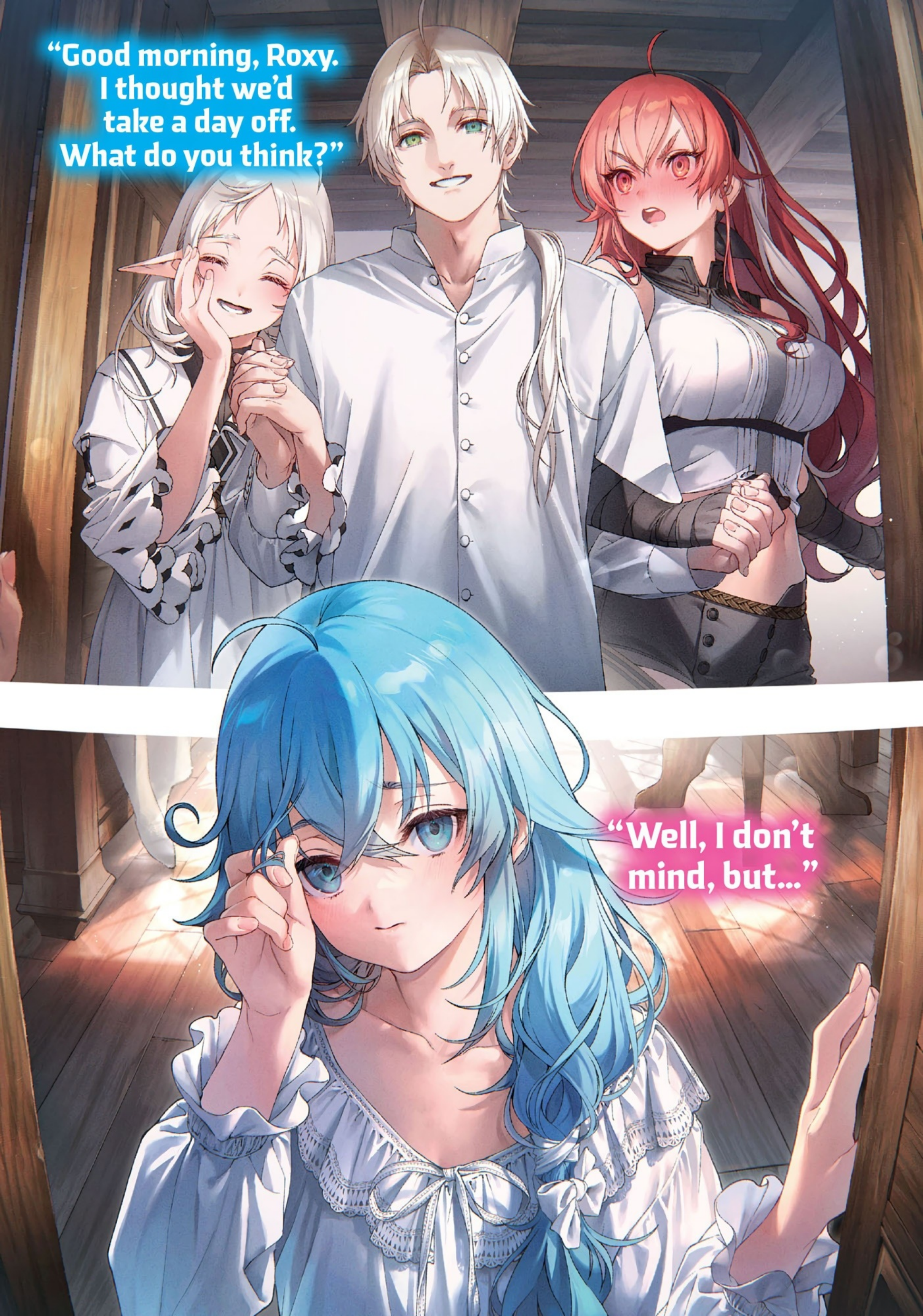
"Good morning, Roxy. I thought we'd take a day off. What do you think?"
"Well, I don't mind, but..."

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jobless reincarnation

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WRITTEN BY
Rifujin na
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ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka

Airship
Seven Seas Entertainment

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"I started walking and, as luck would have it,
I managed a steady pace the rest of my life.
Our manner and time of death isn't written
in the stars, but neither is our good fortune
predestined. Your life is yours."

—I worked hard, lived it up, and died happy.
Couldn't ask for more.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1:
The Threat of the Fighting God

Sandor

MY NAME IS Alex Kalman Rybak. I am the son of North God Kalman by blood, heir to his arts and his name. North God Kalman I… Well, we don't use the numeral when we talk about him; we just call him North God Kalman, but regardless, North God Kalman I was my father. As North God Kalman II, I traveled the world on a quest to become a true hero to bring glory to the name of Kalman. I defeated dragons and a gargantuan behemoth, an evil priest who'd seized control of a nation and a giant man-eating monkey that haunted the hinterlands of the central continent, as well as a foolish tyrant and the guardian of a labyrinth that had wiped out many of the clans of the central continent… With the world's strongest magic sword, the physical toughness I inherited from my mother, and the ultimate sword-fighting techniques developed by my father, I destroyed everyone who stood against me. I gained the title and reputation of the strongest swordsman around. That won me the people's gratitude and their highest esteem. Thanks to my immortal demon blood, I retained my vigor and was able to continue as a hero even though long years went by. I felt elated. As far as I was concerned, I was invincible. I went on, crushing all my opponents, drunk on my own power.

One moment stood out. A moment that convinced me that I really was a hero.

One day on the road, a young boy, not yet of age, stole my magic sword. He took it to a backstreet tavern full of washed-up nobodies. Their leader, a student of Sword God Style, picked up the sword—he was a Sword Saint. Usually, I would've wiped the floor with a Sword Saint. I could have taken him with my bare hands.

…You wouldn't believe how that fight went. The fearsome power of the magic sword elevated the abilities of that washed-up nobody to those of a Sword

Emperor—perhaps even greater. It didn’t matter that it was the first time he’d ever picked it up. I barely managed to defeat him, but the experience left me deeply shaken. It also left me with a question.

Am I truly strong?

While I stood there, consumed by shock after the battle, that nobody swordsman said, “It’s all your fault these parts are such a mess.” That jogged my memory. I was in *that* country. The one where I’d defeated the evil priest who’d seized power and the foolish despot. The priest had been evil, but it was religion that’d kept this nation stable. The king had been a tyrant, but his iron rule had preserved national unity.

Things were different now. Now, these lands were known as the Conflict Zone. Once one great nation, it was now divided into a multitude of smaller countries all fighting amongst themselves. As one fell, another was born in an endless cycle. All were bogged down in a war in which not even the victors were spared. Larger nations went on preying upon them; people went on dying. And it was my fault. I’d decided their ruler was evil and defeated him without ever bothering to consider what anyone else thought about it. My actions had robbed these people of their peace. Acknowledging this, I was left with another question.

Am I really a hero?

For some time, I carried these questions with me. I put down the magic sword, and I gave up being a hero.

In other words, the answer I arrived at for both questions was “No.”

Don’t get the wrong idea. I love heroes. I love listening to all those glorious heroic epics. I still find myself wishing I could be like them, even now. Alas, I didn’t have a talent for heroism, but I still liked to think maybe, with just a little luck, when the right moment came… I’m sure you understand. You know that people aren’t simple like that. What I did when I gave up heroism was I stopped straining to force myself into the hero mold. After contemplating it, I traded out my sword for a staff and focused my efforts on training others. I chose the staff because I thought it was the best of all weapons. It’s simple, and you can find a staff like this one anywhere, so it doesn’t matter if it gets stolen, and it’s only as good a weapon as you are a fighter. From a tactical perspective, there’s also an advantage to a weapon that’s a little longer than a sword. Honestly, though, anything would have done so long as it wasn’t a magic sword.

As for why I wanted to train other people, I think a lot of that might have come from…how to put it…a desire to atone for my sins? It seemed to me that I'd been horribly contemptuous of the people around me. That makes it sound like I thought of them as expendable, but it was more that I divided the world into the main character (me) and the supporting characters (everyone else). I deluded myself that I was the protagonist, which was why I found it so easy to call people evil and pass judgment on them without a thought for the consequences. It's mortifying to recall. Everyone is the protagonist in their own life, everyone has their own desires—just like me. Because I admired heroes so much, my deeds seemed righteous, but the truth wasn't so grandiose. I was no different from the rulers I'd struck down. My dream of becoming a hero was, in short, mere ambition. It was when I realized that that I started to think maybe it would be better to be a supporting character in a true hero's story rather than a hero in my own right. That was how it was with my father, North God Kalman. Yes, he fought alongside Dragon God Urupen and Armored Dragon King Perugius as one of the Three Godslayers, but if you think of it like a story, he wasn't the protagonist. He'd always be the protagonist in my eyes, of course—to me, he was a hero through and through. But my perspective wasn't the only one.

Point being, that was why I tried putting myself in the same position as him. Though I must admit, I also thought being a mentor to a hero sounded pretty smooth…

Taking on all those students turned out to be unexpectedly interesting. It gave me a glimpse into how much more there was to North God style. Things I'd never realized. Some warriors were born with physical disadvantages—some had lost their arms, some were blind since birth—but they all devised their own workarounds, carving out their own ways to win. The North God style that I had learned was what my father taught my mother. Immortal demons' sword fighting relies on brute force, employing their immortality as much as possible, so that's what I thought North God style was all about. But really, North God style was created so that those without strength or who had lost something could still survive on the battlefield. It was taking on all those students that taught me that. Aside from that, things I'd only thought I'd understood came into real focus one after another, my perspective broadened, and I won the respect of many. That respect was a little mellower than what I'd experienced when I was being held up as a hero, but for some reason, it made me happier. At the same time, though I only came to use it by avoiding anything like a magic sword, I grew proud of my staff, my choice of weapon. I'd realized that I'd become steadfast in living my father's philosophy. The thought, I recall, brought tears to my eyes. After that, I became less interested in doing heroic deeds myself.

All sorts of things happened after that, until I ended up in the service of Queen Ariel. In her, I saw that same quality I'd seen in Hero King Gauniss. My assessment wasn't wrong. I entered Ariel's service, then before I knew it she had assembled a group of remarkable advisors and laid a rock-solid foundation for the governance of Asura. Despite this team she had assembled, Ariel didn't start any wars. Instead, she set about making policies to increase national prosperity. She invested a particularly large amount in magical technology and appointed young people to her ministries. When I asked her why was doing so much, even to the point that she faced opposition, her answer surprised me. She told me she was doing what she could in her lifetime to oppose Laplace when he was resurrected some decades hence.

Marvelous! What a great ruler! Truly, I could not have chosen a better master!

Or so I thought. Only then I poked around some more myself and noticed the shady character scurrying around in Ariel's shadow. That somebody was Rudeus Greyrat. It didn't take me long to work out that he was a follower of the Dragon God—Ariel was happy to tell me the whole story. She said that Dragon God Orsted was supporting her.

I'd heard of Dragon God Orsted's unsavory reputation. One person said he'd stabbed an ally of theirs through the heart without warning. Another said he'd suddenly pushed them off a cliff. Another, that he'd snatched the prize they were after out from under their nose. Yet another, that he'd stolen a magic item they'd just gotten their hands on. I don't usually pay much heed to reports from onlookers, but every story I chanced upon repeated his misdeeds.

I have had the privilege of being in the presence of the individual in question on one occasion… Just one look at him struck fear into my heart. The Dragon God and the North God are sworn allies, and the bond of friendship between North God Kalman and Dragon God Urupen will never be broken. It was unthinkable that I should feel fear towards the man who bore the name of Dragon God, even as I was grateful to him. On the contrary, I wanted to nurture a friendship with this generation's Dragon God. Yet I felt fear.

I speculated that perhaps it was a curse—a curse that made everyone who saw him fear him… It wasn't until later that I learned I was right, but that is a story for another time. Because of that heavy curse, this was the first time I'd encountered anyone serving him. This Rudeus Greyrat… You want to know my first impression of him? Well, all right. I thought he looked weak. There was cleverness in him too, but it was more base cunning than intelligence. He seemed trivial. After what Queen Ariel and Ghislaine had told me, I'd expected someone impressive, but in person, he was fully mundane.

Despite that, he didn't strike me as the type of weasel you'll often find toadying up to great warriors or people in power. The contrast between the man and the esteem he inspired intrigued me, and I wondered if he might actually turn out to be hero material. As such, when Queen Ariel sent me to be his backup, I eagerly accepted the task.

Then I took part in a thrilling battle, one that featured the Abyssal King, the Ogre God, the Sword God, and my own son, North God Kalman III. It began with schemes smoldering, then exploding into open conflict… It was just like one of the battles from when I'd been trying to be a hero. Indeed, you'd be hard-pressed to find a fiery battle like that one in the modern day. It was on the level of the battles I'd fought in the past.

Little did I know there was far more to it than even that.

Enter the Fighting God. The ultimate being who, long, long before the Laplace War, had ended the Second Great Human-Demon War. I'd never imagined that he'd turn out to be Uncle Badigadi, but thinking about it, it wasn't out of character. That musclehead was always acting like there was more to him than met the eye. My mother used to say, "Badi puts on a smart guy act but he's really a moron." *Isn't it the opposite?* I'd thought. *Isn't he putting on a moron act? Don't people think you're an idiot because you get this sort of thing backward?* But now that we'd come to this juncture, I sort of got where she was coming from. A moron pretending to be clever—yes. That was fair.

In any case, back to Fighting God Badigadi. If the legends were true, he was the ultimate being, wreaking havoc during the Second Great Human-Demon War and entrenching his position as Number Three of the Seven Great Powers.

Facing him down, I thought, *I really never did have what it took to be a hero*.

You see, no legendary being like him had ever made an appearance in my tale. There'd been challenging opponents, of course, and others whose strength had impressed me. I'd held them in esteem. But after I picked up the magic sword, I'd never found another opponent who outclassed me. It wasn't until I'd set down the sword, my name, and my title, not until I'd given up on being the protagonist of my own story and committed myself to someone else's fight as a side character, that a legendary opponent finally appeared. Maybe Rudeus Greyrat *was* hero material. He probably wouldn't like me saying it, but that's what it's like for heroes. They encounter the enemies they're meant to defeat.

And I encountered ones destined to defeat me.

"Things never turn out how you'd like…" I muttered. In my hands now wasn't a magic sword, but an unremarkable staff. You couldn't ask for a weapon more unfit for going toe to toe with the Fighting God. It wouldn't even make a good scene for the heroic epic that would be written later.

"Fwahahaha! Such is the nature of life and death!"

"That doesn't carry much weight, coming from you."

"Fie! Nothing in my life has turned out as I would have liked it!"

"Is that right? Please, do tell me. I'm riveted." Back when I'd been trying to be a hero, I hadn't gone in for banter like this. I'd become a side character. Even when their goal is simply to buy time, a legendary warrior strives for it as best they can. Badigadi was the Wise Demon King. Contrary to his appearance, he was very learned, and he liked to impart his knowledge to people. Saying I was interested should be enough to get him talking.

Alas, it wasn't to be. The monkey-faced demon at his side interrupted our conversation.

"We ain't got that sorta time. C'mon, bud, stomp this guy already and head after the boss."

I had the feeling I'd seen his face before, but I couldn't for the life of me remember where. I didn't sense any threat in the way he held himself. He didn't seem all that important. In his face, though, I saw extraordinary resolve. That wasn't so surprising, given he'd accompanied the Fighting God into battle.

"Fwahahaha! Very well! But this fellow here, he's a former hero and he's got an ardent following across the world. You can't just treat him like riff-raff."

"I know that, jeez. Only I know another thing too, pal. The chances of North God Kalman II beating Fighting God Badigadi in *this* fight? They're pretty close to zilch."

"Oho! Zilch, is it?"

"Look, I know how this goes. The silver-tongued North God's gonna have you twisted round his little finger if you let him talk."

"Fwahahaha! Never in my wildest dreams would be taken in by the likes of Alex!"

"Big talk from a guy what got taken in by the likes of me."

"There's no 'likes of' about it. I'd take you and your resolve a thousand times over a wishy-washy good-for-naught who ran around kicking up a fuss about how he was going to be a hero until he ran into a setback, dropped the idea, and settled for a bit part."

The Fighting God turned back to me. My plan had failed… It hurt a little that Uncle Badi thought of me as a "good-for-naught," I admit. I liked to think I'd put some consideration into where I was now.

But more importantly, perhaps this meant that the monkey-faced demon had made a serious effort to woo my uncle. That must be Geese. I'd better watch out for him. He was the man Rudeus Greyrat had been hunting for, after all.

"Fwahaha! Then prepare yourself!" Suddenly, the golden armor lurched toward me with ferocious power. I hadn't felt such raw might since I faced off against the King Dragon Blade Kajakut—back before I had the magic sword.

This could well be my final fight. I might have been wanting for strength, but life was giving me a worthy rival. It was time to fight and let fate decide who I was.

"Come on then!" I bellowed, facing down Badigadi. "I, Alex Rybak, North God Kalman II, shall be your opponent!"

***

Have you ever been chewed up and tossed out again like an old rag in the span of five minutes? And to add insult to injury, ever had it happen when you've reached a venerable sort of age and been renowned as a teacher?

I have. Right now, in fact. Fighting God Badigadi was strong. This was my old uncle who, every now and then, liked to drop cryptic comments with an air of significance about his past and skills; I never thought he would be this tough. The only thing I'd thought when I'd sparred with him in the past was that he might be a demon king, but I assumed he was nothing to my mother. Yet now, in a few blows, he'd snapped my staff in two and beaten me to a pulp. I'd been confident in my skill with both my staff and my fists, but he'd thrashed me as though the skills I’d honed over the past hundred years counted for nothing at all.

This was the power of the Fighting God. At first glance, you might think he’d simply augmented his strength and speed. Exchanging blows with him revealed the unbelievable degree to which the armor had improved his defenses. Badigadi wouldn’t be a force to challenge me with your average boosted armor. I could have taken him down empty-handed, whereas he’d never rival me under similar conditions.

Thinking about it, that wasn’t a surprise. Armor exists to protect you, as does defensive technique. Putting on a suit of armor that enhanced your abilities would enhance that too. Add an insurmountable gap in fundamental power and speed on top of that, and your opponent’s in a real fix. It’s like a mouse trying to kill a dragon. The dragon might die from some poison or disease carried by the mouse, but alas, the person inside that armor now was more resistant to such things than anyone alive. Immortal demons don’t die. Poison affects them, and they can fall ill, but neither will lead to death for an immortal demon.

I had no means of doing harm to the Fighting God’s Armor. I was up the creek without a paddle. If I had a magic sword…if I’d had the King Dragon Blade Kajakut, there was so much power wrapped up in that sword that with it, I could have done something.

But as I see it, a true hero is one who uses their wits when they aren’t strong enough. Not that I was the sharpest fellow. The blood of the infamous immortal demon king Atoferatofe flowed through my veins, so there was no chance of that. I had moments of ingenuity, but when push came to shove, I went to brute force. It was no wonder I ended up dependent on my magic sword and robbing people of peace.

But that wouldn’t pass muster this time. I had to do something…but I was at a loss.

Our Father who art in heaven, grant me wisdom.

“Yaaaargh!” Just then, I heard a familiar, female voice—my mother. There was Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe, standing a little way above the rest of us, and she wasn’t alone. In the distance, I could see the hulking figure of the Ogre God. Somehow, I also sensed that the others were hurrying to the scene.

“Come on, we should fall back and—” I started to say, then stopped. The others were one thing, but my mother wouldn’t be stopped now that she’d heard the enemy was attacking. The Ogre God, who made protecting this area his life’s mission, would join her. If Atofe and the Ogre God started to fight, it’d be a bad look if I didn’t join them. As far as fighting power goes, the three of us were among the greatest alive, if I do say so myself.

“Whoa!” Just then, something heavy came crashing down in front of me—a woman. Though…somehow, there was something a bit embarrassing about calling her a woman. Even if it were accurate.

“Mwaaahahahahaha!” It was Mother. Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe had arrived, swooping down with calculated drama.

“I’ll back you up,” she said. As a rule, you couldn’t go asking for all the reasons why my mother did what she did. Immortal Demons as a species were all about acting on the spur of the moment, according to their own peculiar rules.

“Fwahaha! Sister mine, this scoundrel just challenged me to single combat! Would you interfere in a duel between demon king and champion?!”

One of those peculiar rules was: Single-combat is to be observed without interference.

“Eh? Is that true?” she demanded.

“What? I never said that it was.”

Lying through your teeth is another of the skills fostered in North God Style.

“He says he never said it!”

“Fwahahahaha! You really are a moron, sister mine!”

“Screw you! I’m no moron!”

Even if this hadn’t been single combat, it wasn’t like my mother to offer backup to anyone. Perhaps to her, the fact that we were fighting a demon king made our side the champion’s party. If that were so, this was unusual. Her demon king role was a point of pride for her, one that she placed a lot of importance on. She’d rarely ever stepped away from that role until now. Maybe acting like Rudeus’s familiar had wrought some change within her. Either that, or she had some history with the Fighting God Armor.

“Sandor!”

The rest of the team had caught up. There was Master Rudeus and Miss

Eris, Master Cliff, and Miss Elinalise, and even Guard Captain Moore. That was heartening. Although it made my heart swell, I had to wonder if it would be enough for a chance at victory…

Ah, well. Nothing for it but to try.

“Master Rudeus…”

“Fall back and get healed up! We’ll hold him here!”

Oh no, I thought. Rudeus was too focused on what was right in front of him. He was probably thinking that the arch-nemesis he’d been pursuing all this time had shown up out of the blue and looked ready to fight. We’d been caught off guard, but we were rallying. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

But he wasn’t going to listen if I recommended we retreat now. Without a plan, if we retreated here we’d be stuck. I didn’t have any idea what an adequate plan might look like.

Which meant we really did have to do this now.

It wasn’t that it was a bad idea on Master Rudeus’s part, not by any means. I only saw it because of the fight I’d just gone through: With the might we had now, we couldn’t beat Fighting God Badigadi.

***

Our battle with Badigadi began with me submerged in the ocean up to my waist. Engaging him at close range were my mother and the Ogre God, as well as Miss Eris and Master Ruijerd. After Master Cliff cast a healing spell on me, I supported them from a distance. Against such a deadly enemy, we needed to keep the full situation in mind.

Badigadi took on all four of them with Geese still riding on his shoulder. Even burdened by Geese, Badigadi handled his opponents as though they were toddlers.

“Gyaaaah!” Even at this distance, I could tell Mother was mad. You wouldn’t guess it to look at her, but she was fully initiated in North God Style. Our arts had made great strides in the past few hundred years. On top of that, she was an immortal demon king. After however many thousands of years raining terror down upon humans, her power was uncontested. Just her name was enough to make any demon king who knew her of old tremble.

Yet she was powerless against Badigadi, as were the other three. Miss Eris's sword moved too fast for the eye to see, but she couldn't cut through Badigadi. Master Ruijerd's dead-on hits were all parried.

Badigadi dominated.

Atofe's personal guard encircled him at a distance, flinging magic at him. Ice arrows, flame arrows, and stone cannons all rained down on Badigadi—but it was as though every move was snuffed out right before it made contact. The guards' spells didn't reach Geese. Was that the Fighting God Armor's power, or was Geese using a Magic Item? Probably the latter. I didn't know much about Geese, but I was sure he'd done his homework where Master Rudeus was concerned. The Man-God was involved here, so it was best to assume that he had a plan worked out for how to counter us. In other words, our first priority was to take down Geese. Unfortunately, you only had to look at how badly Mother was struggling to know that getting close to him would be no easy task.

"I'll hit him with magic first!" Rudeus called. "Back me up!" After watching the battle for a while, Master Rudeus seemed to have made up his mind. Despite coming across as a bit of a coward, when the moment of crisis came, he wasn't running.

He inhaled. I sensed the magic gathering in his hands. For a moment, I hesitated, unsure whether he might catch Mother and the Ogre God in whatever he was going to do. His target…well, who else would it be? It was Geese. He'd reached the same conclusion I had. With his magic, it should've been simple to directly attack an opponent he had a clear line of sight on.

What sort of magic was he planning on using? The spells he favored were Stone Cannon, Quagmire, and Deep Mist… But the Stone Cannons the guards were firing were being vaporized.

"All right." Master Rudeus raised his hand above his head, and a sudden gust of wind bellowed. The air crackled with unbridled magic. I looked up at the sky and saw at once that black clouds had closed over the dark sky. They were growing. Rain began to fall around us. In the distance, a roll of thunder. The wind howled, stirring up waves on the ocean. This had to be the Saint-tier water spell, Cumulonimbus…except that spell was solely for use against enemy armies. Even if it did work on the Fighting God, it would also do terrible damage to our allies. The ocean swelled before my eyes. As the waves started to grow larger, Mother and the others looked like they were struggling a little. Only a little, mind you.

Master Rudeus must’ve intended to strike just beyond them with the King-tier water spell, Lighting. Usually, you’d compress Cumulonimbus before it was complete and bring it down as lighting. This time, the clouds went on expanding. Tornadoes spun up around them and the fierce winds and rain lashed at my face. With my poor understanding of magic, I wouldn’t have seen it, but I knew offensive strategy, and so I understood: a special technique. Master Rudeus was about to use a special technique.

The waves grew higher, and the shockwaves from the three who continued to fight sent up plumes of water. Clouds filled the entirety of the sky. It was dark and I couldn’t even see fifty meters in front of me due to the rain. Even then, while I wouldn’t have lost sight of my opponent, I wouldn’t be surprised if these fighters had lost sight of Rudeus. He, by contrast, was aided by the Eye of Distant Sight.

The demon eye would no doubt be fixed as usual on the three fighters. Demon King Badigadi neutralized the power of demonic eyes, so he, and Geese up there on his shoulder, would be nigh impossible to make out. But Master Rudeus had to be able to see Atofe and the Ogre God, and so know where to aim.

Master Rudeus's raised hand closed in a fist. An accumulation of magic, so enormous I felt my hair stand on end, rose into the heavens. Just like that, the clouds contracted. Those clouds that had seemed as though they might cover the whole world vanished in an instant.

I could see the moon.

He was waiting for his moment. I didn't say anything. Not, "Now!" Or, "On my word!" or anything else. Why? Because Master Rudeus knew what he was doing. He wouldn't miss his mark.

Mother and the Ogre God both attacked at once, and Badigadi threw both of them back. For a split second, there was distance between them and the Fighting God.

That was the moment. Rudeus swung his arm down.

"Lightning."

It was like no Lightning I'd ever seen before. The spell Lightning compresses thunderclouds to bring down a bolt of lightning. But what came shooting down now wasn't lightning. It was a pillar of light. The moment it materialized, all sound around us was blotted out. For a moment, the rain stopped, and the world was engulfed in still, frigid brightness.

Beneath the pillar of light, a vast tower of water rose. Then came a thunderous rumble, akin to the thunder after ordinary lightning, battering my eardrums.

"…and…to…of earth…"

Through the roar, I heard snatches of Master Cliff's incantation. In response, Master Rudeus began to prepare another spell.

A mass of water rushing toward me obscured my vision. The impact of his Lightning spell had raised a tidal wave on an Apocalyptic scale. Before my eyes, the water rushed closer, sweeping up everything in its path—

"Sand Swarm." It collided with the mass of sand, and the two slammed into one another, each canceling the other out. Through the combination of Master Rudeus and Master Cliff's magic, the water dissipated into brown rain, muddying the waters of the ocean and the beach. I watched the rain fall, then turned back to the Fighting God.

I strained my eyes, trying to locate a trace of gold.

I found nothing. I couldn't make out any trace of him.

“Did I get him?” Master Rudeus murmured, perhaps not realizing he’d said it out loud.

Not that *saying* it could rob us of a victory, but it was still an unlucky phrase. I knew from experience. If you’re muttering, “Did I get him?” you didn’t.

I twitched, sensing something above me. I looked up. Miss Eris and Master Ruijerd seemed to have sensed it too. A split second later, a pillar of sand materialized. Something was coming down out of the sky. Even drenched in the muddy rain, it sparkled.

Gold.

“Ugh.” I heard Master Rudeus groan.

It hit the ground right in front of him. Even in the Magic Armor, the golden armor was twice his size. Was what lay beneath that helmet really the face I knew?

“Thought I was a goner,” came a voice from the armor’s shoulder. Its source was the mud-drenched, monkey-faced demon, Geese Nukadia.

Then, the armor spoke. “I am Fighting God Badigadi! Friend to the Man-God, heir to the name of Fighting God! I challenge Rudeus Greyrat to single combat!”

“N-no thank you!”

“Fwahahaha! You’re wasting your breath!”

There was no time to stop him. The golden armor’s punch hit Rudeus straight on. One hit was all it took. One hit and the Magic Armor fell apart. Rudeus was thrown into the sky, falling back to the ground with a thud.

“Rudeus!” Miss Eris’s cry echoed around us.

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Have you ever seen someone mauled, then tossed out like an old rag?

I have. I’ve seen it more times than I can count, and I’ve done it to people with my own hands. I wasn’t on the giving side of it this time. Just now, the majestic Magic Armor had been torn into scrap metal, Rudeus tumbling from it like a ragdoll. He was face down at first, so I couldn’t see it, but he was at least ragged enough to make the scrappy regulars at your tavern laugh and say, "Looking handsome, boy!"

Over the following ten seconds, the rest of our side fell to pieces.

Mother exploded. The attack left only her legs behind, and now she had to regenerate. Of course, she'd be back and cackling before too long. The Ogre God was beaten black and blue, and his arm was broken. Ogres are hard to kill, but going off the amount of blood coming out of his mouth, if he didn't get a healing spell soon, he was going to die. With Rudeus down too, morale plummeted. Miss Eris ran to Rudeus's side, calling out to him as she held her sword at the ready. Master Ruijerd wasn't such a coward that he'd give up the fight just because his commander went down, but he was visibly shaken. Master Cliff had lost his nerve and Miss Elinalise's shield was shattered, forcing her withdrawal. Moore would fight on to the death for my mother, but without her, it looked like he'd decided to retreat.

The time had come.

I reached down and picked up my mother's fallen sword, the sword of Demon King Atoferatofe. One of the forty-eight magic swords crafted by the great demon swordsmith Julian Harisco. This was the magic sword Jawbreaker. That gruff old mule of a smith had made an offering of it to my mother in his father's honor. Apparently, she'd shown a rare display of gravitas when she accepted it, and from that day forth, she'd kept it on her person at all times. She'd never let anyone else wield it.

Well. With this, I could let loose a little.

"Master Ruijerd! Master Moore!" The two of them glanced my way for just a second. They didn't have their full attention to spare, but they were listening. "I'll make an opening for you! Fall back!"

All heroic epics come to an end. Fairy tales closed on a great finale after vanquishing an evil demon king, but reality wasn't so generous. Almost always, the end is quite tedious. You challenged an enemy greater than yourself, or you fell for someone's plot, or else you were challenged by a new hero. You lost. You died. That's how it was for my father, North God Kalman. No matter how incredible a hero might be, no matter how strong, so long as they engage in war, defeat and death are sure to catch up with them eventually. A hero, after all, is heroic. Even when they know the hero dies in the end, people light up at his glorious exploits. The heroes' way imprints itself onto their hearts.

My death here wouldn't be written down anywhere, though… Just like my father, North God Kalman. The death he went to was never written down.

Well, I looked up to my father. Why not go the same way? I'd go up against an enemy I had no hope of defeating and go down in a blaze of glory. It wasn't the death I'd pictured for myself… *But hell, whose death is?*

"In my left hand, a sword."

Been a while since I said this out loud. Hope I don't choke or stammer…

"In my right hand, a sword." I gripped the hilt with both hands. Power bubbled up from the pit of my stomach, flowing out to fill my body. I set my sights on the raging golden armor.

"With these, mine arms, countless lives shall I claim, and a hundred million deaths I deliver!"

The words I'd said countless times in my life when the crucial moment came. I'd told myself that once I'd spoken those words, defeat was out of the question. I hadn't spoken them once since I gave up being a hero. Even after all this time, as I went to meet defeat, I was surprised at how they flowed off my tongue.

"I am North God Alex Rybak. Prepare yourself!"

This would be my final battle, so I'd make it count.

Rudeus

WHEN I CAME TO, I smelled something good. It was a little sweaty, but pleasant and familiar. In the corner of my eye, I saw rippling red hair, just as I felt a warmth on my cheek. Something was pressed against it.

"Are you awake?!" Whatever was touching my cheek spoke. That was Eris's voice. Awareness rushed back. Eris was carrying me on her back.

"What's going on?" Jerking upright, I looked about. A few others, looking like refugees, were walking with us. Cliff, Elinalise, and Ruijerd.

"We lost," Eris said curtly. She sounded bitter.

They'd gone in again against the Fighting God only to be beaten to a pulp.

Eris had blacked out after one hit, and Elinalise's shield was shattered. Atofe and the Ogre God had put up a valiant fight, but the Fighting God had thrown them off again and again. Because I was down for the count, Moore had ordered our retreat. Ruijerd retrieved Eris and me. With Atofe, her personal guard, the Ogre God, and Sandor covering our retreat, we'd gotten away.

"Right." I was reeling. We'd lost, just like that. I didn't think of myself as the toughest guy around or anything like that. The first time I took the Version One out against Orsted, I'd lost then too. I knew I wasn't invincible. Still, my confidence had been bolstered by a run of recent victories. I'd beaten Atofe and Alec. I hadn't beaten Alec alone, but a win was a win. I'd still always tried to consider the possibility I might lose. This was my first one-punch knockout. This was the first time I'd been blown to smithereens and knocked out cold in a single hit.

Had I underestimated Badigadi? Had I thought, Fighting God or not, the demon king would still pull his punches?

"What's our next move?" Eris asked.

I thought about it. Next…what should we *do*? I wouldn't have said we were all out of options, but there was no way any smart-ass plan I came up with would beat the Fighting God. I didn't have much faith in our firepower. A glance around told me Sandor, the Ogre God, Atofe, and her personal guard weren't with us. They could be dead. That left me, Eris, Ruijerd, Cliff, Elinalise…and the Superd warriors, if they counted. I definitely didn't count as reliable firepower; without the Magic Armor, I was more of a liability. All I could do was make a river, or a mountain, or set the mountain on fire. You know, like in that folktale, The Three Lucky Charms. After drinking up the river, leaping over the mountain, and putting out the fire with the river water, the Fighting God would come chasing after me, just like the witch in that story. We couldn't win with our current lineup.

"We have no choice but to flee," Ruijerd said, looking me in the eye.

"Ruijerd…"

"He's one of the Seven Great Powers. The real thing. We can't win against him even with all our strength combined."

So we'd run away. We'd run back to the Superd village, then…and then what? In The Three Lucky Charms, the boy ran to a temple, where the priest used his wiles to beat the witch. We did have Priest Orsted back in the Superd Village. And yet… The Fighting God and Geese wanted to kill me and use up

Orsted's power. If Orsted fought the Fighting God, he'd have to expend mana on an order of magnitude greater than he would have in a fight with the likes of the North God and the Sword God. No question, if that happened, we'd lose the war. And those two would chase us to the ends of the world to achieve their goal. There was nowhere we could go and be safe.

"Even if we run, we can't win," I said.

"Then all we can hope for is to fight and die with honor," Ruijerd said.

When you fought and died with honor and lost, you still lost. You didn't get to call that a win. *When you die, that's it.*

"Rudeus, pull yourself together." Eris's hand squeezed mine. Her grip was warm and firm. She'd saved me more times than I could remember with those hands. She'd held our child with those hands.

"Right." Calm down and think, Rudy. How can we *win*?

We needed information before anything else. If the Fighting God Armor had a weak point, for example, that'd do nicely. Unfortunately, as the story told it, that armor was the strongest in existence, crafted by Laplace himself. He'd gone down trying to beat his own creation! Finding a weak point probably wasn't happening. Even if it didn't have any, though, there were still other strategies, ways to fight it. I might be able to find something about that. Now, who knew about the armor? Atofe…wasn't here. Which left Orsted. I'd have to ask him. If it turned out he didn't know anything…

I pondered in silence for a moment. Whether Orsted knew anything or not, I'd still have to fight this enemy, here and now. We'd lost Atofe, the Ogre God, and Sandor. There *had* to be a way to win.

That said, I wanted to keep our casualties to a minimum. I didn't want the Superd Village to get caught in the crossfire. Norn was there, too. I couldn't let her fight.

There had to be a chance. There had to be. Even if it was only a fraction of a percent.

Then it came to me. *That's it!*

I still had one trump card in my hand, didn't I? I had figured I'd use it much earlier.

At last, I said, "We'll fall back to the forest to buy some time."

I was going to stake everything on this.

“Got it.” The others all nodded.

***

We made our way back to the Superd Village. My trump card still hadn’t shown up. All things going to plan, I would’ve expected it to be here already… But maybe something had gone wrong.

We didn’t have time to wait around for it. *What to do…?*

Pushing aside my worries, I knelt in front of Orsted to report on what had happened up until yesterday.

“That brings us up to speed,” I finished. “The Ogre God, Atofe, and Sandor are all missing.”

Orsted face was stormy. “Fighting God Badigadi, you say.”

“Is there any strategy to beat him?”

“No,” Orsted said at length. “The Fighting God Armor I know, but I have never fought Badigadi wearing it.”

“Oh. I see.” It was the answer I’d expected, but I still couldn’t help but be disappointed—not that I’d let Orsted see that. “Then would you tell me what you know about the Fighting God Armor?”

“It is the strongest armor ever created, forged by Laplace. It was buried in the depths of the Devil’s Cave in the middle of the Ringus Sea. The mana that radiates from its surface makes it glow gold, and it makes the wearer unstoppably powerful. Because of that abundance of mana, however, it possesses a mind of its own. It will possess anyone who wears it.”

“Badigadi didn’t seem like he’d been possessed…” He’d looked like he was acting of his own free will, anyway. He acted exactly as I remembered. Of course, maybe he just *appeared* that way, and the armor was actually in control. He hadn’t given Atofe or Sandor the time of day, after all.

“It takes time,” Orsted said slowly, “for the armor to possess the wearer. The longer they wear it, the stronger the armor’s hold on their mind becomes, until they cease to be able to tell right from wrong, craving nothing but to do battle. Although, Badigadi has an unusual immunity to the powers of the demon eyes, so it is possible that the armor will be unable to possess him.”

Aha. Badigadi hadn’t been wearing the armor for all that long yet, then. I also had the feeling I’d heard of that kind of possession somewhere before…

“Like your Magic Armor, the Fighting God Armor uses the mana of the wearer as fuel. Unlike yours, however, the wearer cannot take it off until the last of their life force has been exhausted. In Badigadi’s case, I expect it will keep operating almost indefinitely. The moment the wearer puts it on, it transforms to fit them—they can also generate their preferred weapon. The range is limited to that weapon’s typical range, but I doubt Badigadi will have chosen a long-range weapon. The golden light emitted from the surface of the armor neutralizes most magic…although it does have a threshold. If you hit it with the strongest Stone Cannon you can cast, it might get through.”

Orsted knew a lot. And he was being talkative for a change.

Right, okay. So Stone Cannon would have been a more effective choice than Lightning. I’d messed that up, though I didn’t know that at the time.

“Who was wearing it last time you fought it?” I asked.

“One of the Sea Merfolk. They ran out of mana and died quickly.”

“Were there any others?”

“I have donned it myself several times. I have also seen one human wear it, and one demon.”

Wow. I guess if he hadn’t tried it, he wouldn’t know all those details.

“Okay, so to get specific, how do I beat it?”

Orsted was silent for a moment, then said, “I do not know.”

“You don’t?”

“When you wear the Fighting God Armor, you feel neither weariness nor pain. You are always fighting at your full potential. However, you are only ever moving it under your own physical power, and it has no ability to heal the wearer if they are wounded. Thus, if you have a way to damage it, a battle of attrition may prove effective. However…”

However, that was impossible against Badigadi. The Fighting God Armor kept going until the wearer died. And Badigadi was immortal. We had a perpetual motion machine on our hands.

“How did Laplace defeat it?”

“He hit it with an enormous output of magic that overshot its threshold, temporarily annihilating the wearer and separating them from the armor. It created a great rift in the continent that became the Ringus Sea."

"Oh." So it was possible to do damage to it with a strong-enough attack. Badigadi would just regenerate afterward, instead of dying, but that did give me one idea…

"I heard the wearer back then died," Orsted remarked. "I imagine it must have been Badigadi all along."

"You didn't know?"

"They say even Laplace didn't know who wore the armor during that battle. I heard they'd died and had no interest in finding out more. The Fighting God has never challenged me as an enemy like this before."

"Did you…did you hear that from Laplace himself, in a past loop?"

"Yes. That, and that I am the son of the first Dragon God, and that first Dragon God was the one to lay this curse upon me."

"And yet you have to kill Laplace."

"Correct. To reach the Man-God, I must kill the five Dragon Generals and retrieve the sacred treasures."

I fell silent. This had to be the first time I'd heard him say it flat out: he had to kill the Dragon Generals. So that was the deal. We couldn't count on Perugius to send reinforcements, then. I wouldn't want to ask for aid from someone I planned to stab in the back later. Continuing this line of question now wasn't going to do me any good.

"That's an unpleasant subject for you, I expect," Orsted said.

"Um, well…"

Focus on what's in front of us. First up: Badigadi.

The Man-God acted based on what he saw in his own future. A free-spirited and rambunctious pawn like Badigadi would be tricky for him to control. Maybe this unpredictability was the Man-God's true trump card, though? I'd just seen the Man-God for the first time in a long time, and he looked pretty haggard, like he was stuck in a tough spot. Fighting God Badigadi… If Badigadi had been the Man-God's disciple all along, I didn't know why the Man-God hadn't made use of him in any previous loops. Let's assume that this time, we'd dragged it out of him. If it didn't happen in a previous loop, then odds were that the Man-God was reacting directly to me.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll fight. There's nowhere to run."

"Very well. I shall join you. I have never fought this particular battle before, but I surely cannot lose," Orsted said, then stood up. I moved to discourage him.

"Please, not so fast."

Orsted sat back down. I couldn't see his face behind the helmet, but I knew he looked indignant.

"Sir Orsted, if you use up your mana, we might as well have lost. We'll have wasted all the good progress we've made."

"We also lose if you die here. A waste of good progress, as you say."

"True…"

Should we seize the day today, or tomorrow? We'd fought our way this far. I at least wanted to stick it out until it really seemed like all was lost.

"Even if you do have to fight, I can at least soften the Fighting God up for you first," I suggested.

"You'll die."

"Then take care of my family for me." I didn't want to die. I wanted to live and go home. But this, I was sure, was where everything came to a head. The Fighting God was Geese and the Man-God's final play. The Man-God might have something else up his sleeve, but we'd taken down the Abyssal King, the North God, and the Ogre God. His final disciple was out in the open. All his down cards were flipped. It'd have to hurt if we took the Fighting God out too. I had to stick it out, fight, and win.

"Very well. But when you see you cannot win, you must not hesitate before retreating. Am I clear?"

"Thank you." I bowed, then stood up. "Also…any word from Roxy?"

"Not yet."

"All right. If you hear anything, please let me know. Right away."

Orsted nodded, then I left the house.

Outside, the warriors were waiting for me: Eris, her eyes sharp and aura savage. Ruijerd, with his air of serenity. Cliff, a little worked up, nervous, and with fear in his eyes. Elinalise, watching Cliff with a protective look. Dohga, who'd heard that Sandor had fallen and seemed ready to cry. Zanoba, who was dressed in the Superd's traditional garments after losing everything he had on him in the last battle. And finally, the Superd warriors, here to protect their village.

This was our lineup, and to be honest, it didn't fill me with confidence. The gap left by Sandor, Atofe, and the Ogre God was massive. They were all on par with the Seven Great Powers, a class—even two classes—above our current members.

Still, Dohga and Zanoba were a good substitute for the Ogre God, and they were still here. Badigadi favored close combat. Not a bad match up…except for how they had lost to the Ogre God, too. We were well-matched in power if you considered each of us individually and together—theoretically—but I wasn't sure how much that would matter. *Not all our cards are losers,* that's what it meant: no more, no less. Still, we might be able to hold the Fighting God off for a day or two. The chances of my trump card making it back before our bodies gave out weren't good. Even if it did arrive, it was no guarantee of victory. I might just end up killing my allies for no reason.

"Let's go."

Even so, this was it. I had a plan, but the odds were all against me. I had no proof I'd read things correctly. I might have just enough time to set a trap, but we wouldn't win against this opponent with parlor tricks.

No one said anything else. They just followed me. We were going into battle with the Fighting God.

Chapter 2:
The Trump Card

IT TOOK A FULL DAY for the Fighting God to appear. We had Atofe and the others to thank for that; they'd held him back. But they hadn't come back. I doubted an immortal demon could die that easily, but Atofe must have taken enough damage to prevent her from pursuing the Fighting God. All the same, thanks to their sacrifice, we were fully prepared.

The Fighting God came directly. He didn't try to hide or to rush. He just strolled on in, Geese on his shoulder, as if to declare nothing could stop him.

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We commenced hostilities near the entrance to the forest. I stood on top of a towering wall, about ten meters high and two kilometers long, that I'd built to protect the forest. From up there, I rained magic down on what lay below—Stone Cannons, specifically. I wanted to at least knock Geese down, so I fired off as many shots as I could. The Eye of Distant Sight didn't work against Badigadi. Orsted said even he didn't know why, but it was probably safe to assume Badigadi was a Blessed Child with that power, or else that he'd done something in the past that had given him resistance to Demon Eyes.

He was far away, but you couldn't miss the gold, and I'd been practicing Stone Cannon ever since I was born into this world. My hits were landing. For every ten shots I fired, one hit. Only, even at this distance, I could tell they weren't doing much damage. When I got a direct hit, a hole opened in the gold armor, but it repaired itself straight away. I wasn't piercing it, and I wasn't slowing him down. The Fighting God walked towards us without even bothering to defend himself. My firepower must have been weakened by the distance. I had no choice but to hit him at point-blank range if I wanted to really get to him.

Oh, and I got one hit on Geese. It was hard to tell from this far away, but at the moment of impact he'd fallen off Badigadi's shoulder. Seemed conclusive. Although, right after that he got back up like nothing had happened, so I'd apparently done almost no damage. He did move to stand behind Badigadi rather than get back up on his shoulder, like I'd woken him up, at least. A hit at closer range might have done enough damage to insta-kill him, but given I hadn't taken him out with the lightning, it seemed safe to assume that Geese had given himself some sort of magical resistance.

In the end, I couldn't manage anything close to slowing them down. Once the Fighting God got close enough, I used fire magic to burn the outer wall, then retreated into the forest. I wasn't about to get any closer than I had to.

As I confirmed that the wall had been destroyed, I said to myself, "All according to plan. We've got this. We'll be okay…"

Yup. I knew this is how things would go. There was no way this'd be enough to stop them.

When the Fighting God entered the trees, I cast a wide-area Deep Mist to cover the entire forest, then I added a Quagmire of the same size. Reconnaissance and guerrilla tactics I'd leave to Ruijerd and the Superd warriors. My Demon Eyes didn't work, but Ruijerd and the other Superd's eyes were definitely trained on the Fighting God.

It worked. A report came that thanks to the Superd's tactics combined with the Deep Mist, the Fighting God had become lost and spent several hours stumbling around in the fog. Hoping that he'd get so lost he ended up back at the edge of the forest again, I continued to cast Dense Mist and Quagmire over the whole area.

Then, after a few hours, Ruijerd came with a report. "The Fighting God has settled on his direction of advance." He was heading straight for the Ravine of the Earthwyrm. I bet that was Geese. Badigadi alone would've been one thing, but Geese seemed like the sort to know how to find his way in a forest under Dense Mist. I questioned whether pure know-how would be enough to actually do it, but it wasn't hard to imagine he'd used some sort of magical implement or magic item. Although if he'd had a magic implement, they wouldn't have wandered for hours in the first place. He probably took time and used old-school methods to determine their position and direction. Geese could probably manage that.

So with Deep Mist, Quagmire, and the Superd's guerilla tactics, we'd managed to slow them down for a measly three hours. Three of our fighters were dead. The Fighting God had taken out the Superd warriors who had gotten too close to him, but their deaths weren't in vain. They'd stopped him long enough for the sun to set. When that happened, the Fighting God stopped moving. He wasn't solar-powered or anything, but he ceased activity at night even so.

Not me, though. I didn't let up with Dense Mist or Quagmire, and the Superd never paused their campaign. I carried out long-range attacks with Blast Cannon. I wasn't hoping to do any damage. The point was not to let them sleep, not to let them rest. It might not have much effect on Badigadi, but it would affect Geese.

The first day ended.

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On the second day, we carried on like we had on the first afternoon. We made the most of the full day to lure the Fighting God toward the Ravine of the Earthwyrm.

The third day dawned. I stood atop the barricading wall I'd built at the edge of the cliff on the other side of the ravine, keeping a close watch on the shadowy forest. Right beside me stood Ruijerd, also staring hard at the forest. The Ravine of the Earthwyrm was extremely well-suited to defense—it was almost a kilometer deep and, though I hadn't realized the first time I'd crossed it, the cliff on the side of the Superd Village was slightly elevated. As a rule, the side with the high ground had an advantage in a fight. Height gave better visibility, and climbing took more energy than descending. Thanks, gravity. With that in mind, I'd used earth magic to build a barricade wall at the edge of the cliff on the Superd Village side. It was almost twenty meters tall, shorter than the one at the edge of the forest. Seeing as this was the only point that the ravine narrowed, that wasn't a problem. I had made a hole in that defense when I'd made a bridge as a way in, but that hole had been filled when I brought the bridge down with me. With this, we wouldn't have to deal with another episode like with the Ogre God, where we suddenly found ourselves fighting at close quarters after he cleared the gap with a running jump.

Probably.

Not to underestimate the Fighting God's powers, but this wall was the tallest and strongest I could make it in the short time I had. If he could still jump over it, we might as well just give up. Assuming he couldn't, if he clung onto the cliff face, I could blast him with Stone Cannons from above. In this battle, I'd learned that even if he could neutralize magic, that didn't extend to neutralizing changes in the landscape. The first battle had shown me that Stone Cannon was plenty effective. And Geese, well, he didn't have any strength. If I hit him with a

Stone Cannon while he clung to the cliff face, he'd fall to the bottom of the ravine. Even if knocking him off that way failed, I might be able to make him slip off by dropping a massive volume of water on him. Geese was a tricky guy, but he was useless in a head-on brawl.

Badi seemed like he'd have some tricks up his sleeve, though, and Geese was cunning. They were a perfect match. Risky as it was to lead them to the narrow point in the ravine, it was still better than having them cross without our noticing and then blindsiding us. I stood with Cliff, Ruijerd, and the Superd warriors above the ravine. The other Superd were positioned at regular intervals along the stretches not covered by the wall so that we'd be alerted right away if Badigadi crossed there. Eris stood by, directly behind the wall. Once Geese and Badigadi broke through, it'd be all-out war. We'd bought ourselves some time. What should have been a day's journey, traveling in a straight line, had taken three. We'd earned an extra two days… But I still hadn't heard anything from Roxy, so that extra time might have been for nothing. Still, I wouldn't change my approach. I knew from the battle in the port town I couldn't win a head-on fight. I wanted my trump card.

Night fell. I had no idea when they might come. The Superd were watching the forest with me, but wherever our enemy was camped was outside of their detection range.

Keep on your toes, I thought. Just then, I heard Ruijerd shout.

"They're here!"

I strained my eyes as hard as I could to look into the shadows of the forest. There they were. They were no bigger than a grain of rice, but there was someone standing in the trees. No golden sheen, though. This person wore a white robe. I'd seen a white robe like that before.

It was Geese. Well, it was possible it was someone else, but it looked like Geese.

"Who is it?"

"It's him," Ruijerd said with conviction. The distance between us and them was within the range of his third eye. It was unlikely Ruijerd was wrong. Geese appeared to be watching us, not from up close to the edge of the ravine, but from back in the forest, among the undergrowth. It was still too dark to see clearly, but it really did look like him. And I couldn't spot the faintest sparkle of gold anywhere nearby. Geese was alone.

"Huh?"

Alone? Was he scouting by himself? Geese, who knew the magic I could use, who knew I had the Eye of Distant Sight, who knew there were Superd here, was alone? Was he that confident? Or was Badigadi lying in wait nearby? The ravine was a hundred meters across at most; if Badigadi were close enough to come to Geese's defense, Ruijerd would be able to see him.

An attack from me would take him down, wouldn't it?

At this realization, my heart started racing. Stone Cannon would reach him. Geese was looking our way, but I had the feeling he couldn't see me. I'd hit him. It was a hundred meters. Even considering height and position, the arc of a Stone Cannon, the shot couldn't be more than two hundred. If I aimed carefully, that was a distance I could reliably hit from.

I paused. Should I do it? What if it was someone else? Like, an adventurer in a white robe. Who'd just happened to get lost in the forest. In the middle of a battle.

Yeah. No way.

After the Dense Mist and Quagmire of the previous day, the forest was a mess. No adventurer would have made it this far. Even if they'd already been close to the ravine when it began, the Superd's radar would have picked them up.

I could take out Geese right now. What should I do? It was one hundred percent a trap. What sort of trap? Right now, I could attack. What could he do? Was there some advantage he got by making me attack? Let's say that whoever was over there looked like Geese but was actually someone else. Could they be one of my friends or family? No way. That was impossible. Up until yesterday, it had only been the two of them. They couldn't have brought someone along out of nowhere.

In which case, was this an opening? Up until now, I'd been focused on buying time and hadn't been actively attacking. They'd made rapid progress from the port town to here.

After a leisurely journey with Badigadi, maybe he was cocky about an easy victory. Couldn't it be that he'd let his guard down and revealed himself to us? It'd be the easiest thing to attack, and the risk was low. No reason not to, right? It was also possible he'd somehow placed someone there who I didn't want to see die. Strategically, what would the point of that be? What was the point of my not attacking now?

I was getting muddled. It felt like a trap, but even so, I couldn’t think of any downsides to attacking.

All right, let’s fire at him. Maybe it’s a trap, but there’s no downside to just shooting him.

If he responded, he responded.

“I’m going to attack,” I said.

“Understood.”

I concentrated magic in my right hand. I was more interested in accuracy than speed and power. I still couldn’t see Geese with the Eye of Distant Sight, but I used it to project the landscape while flicking the mana for the Eye of Foresight, predicting where my shot would land. In case it went wide, I decided to use Blast Cannon.

I hesitated before I fired, just for a moment. That moment passed and a Stone Cannon burst from my fingers, hurtling towards the other side of the ravine on a dead straight trajectory.

There was no sound. As it impacted, the figure on the other side collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, then was still.

The shot had hit, and it had gotten results. Time passed. It was surreal, like nothing had happened. The fallen figure didn’t move. In the light of the morning, all I could hear was the quiet rustling of the forest. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty. I wasn’t keeping track of the exact time, but it kept on slipping away.

A feeling took root within me. I wanted to *know*. Whatever was lying on the ground over there after I’d hit it, I wanted to know what it was. Was it Geese, or something else? Was it alive or dead? I could hop on down there and be back again in a jiffy. Surely that would be fine.

But as that idea came to me, I realized what was going on. *This* was the trap. Geese’s plan wasn’t to make me attack but to make me feel what I felt now.

Maybe whoever lay down there really was Geese, on the verge of death, and all I had to do to win was strike the final blow. Maybe it was Sylphie—they’d captured her at some point, then come up with some way to deceive Ruijerd’s eye, and if I didn’t go to her aid right now she’d die. Even if either of those were true, if I went to look, the Fighting God would appear, and I’d die. I couldn’t go.

An hour passed. I was on edge. Had I made some irreversible mistake? Should I not have shot the figure after all? Was their aim in making me shoot it to keep me locked down here?

What if, even now, they were crossing the ravine at another point? Okay, no, I *did* have the Superd warriors guarding the ravine at least. I had to trust them.

Two hours passed. Should I have gone to check after all? Might going down to check give me a clue as to Geese's next move? Was I just avoiding finding out the truth for some reason?

Three hours passed. Nothing moved. All sorts of patterns floated in and out of my mind. This wondering was starting to wear me out. If Geese's plan was to make me exhausted, he was succeeding.

After four hours, I was certain. That was a corpse. It hadn't moved for four hours, so it had to be a body. But whose? Was it really plausible that Geese was dead, and Badigadi hadn't done anything? If Roxy were here, she might have had something constructive to say. When I asked Cliff, he just frowned and shook his head.

Six hours passed. I ate a quick lunch, then returned to watching the corpse. It didn't move.

Eight hours passed. The afternoon was wearing on, and the sun was growing steadily lower in the sky. Maybe because I'd been on constant alert, I was only getting more tired. If the sun set below the horizon and still nothing happened, I'd go have a look.

When the tenth hour passed, Ruijerd said abruptly, "Rudeus. He's here."

With a start, I looked to the forest, just in time to see the shining golden armor step out from the trees. When the armor drew near, the corpse slowly got up. It put its face up to the armor for a while, as though it was saying something, then turned to look our way. I saw the shrug. That was Geese's shrug, no doubt about it. Without any further fanfare, the two of them retreated into the depths of the forest. Silence fell once more.

“Whew…”

It *had* been a trap. The figure was Geese, but he had used himself as bait to try and lure me out. I’d been close to falling for it.

Night was about to fall. I’d leave the Superd warriors on guard and catch a bit of sleep. My mind was fried. They might come back as the sun set, but I’d settle for just a nap.

“I’m taking a break,” I said. I curled up in a blanket.

The third day ended.

***

It was the third night. It seemed that after seeing our wall, Geese and Badigadi were struggling to work out an effective attack strategy. Badigadi couldn’t simply jump over the wall, and if he couldn’t do that, he couldn’t protect Geese. I’d been right on that count. Then there were the missiles that came hurtling at us from the other side of the valley. First came a massive boulder that hit the wall at hair-raising speed, knocking out a chunk of the wall. More boulders and tree trunks followed, coming one after another at terrifying speeds. I woke to the cacophony and intercepted them all, so they didn’t do any significant damage. Badigadi and Geese must have decided that unless they did something about the wall, they couldn’t get through. That would explain this attack. Based on what I’d seen of the Fighting God’s battle style, he could have smashed his way through if he were alone. It had to be Geese holding him back. If he left Geese behind and leaped over, he could get through…only then, if a pursuit came from the rear, Geese would be dead meat. Not that there weren’t any reinforcements coming from outside the forest… Well, except maybe Atofe, if she regenerated then came after us. Maybe they were afraid of something like that. A single Superd warrior on the forest side should be enough, to be fair…but it was possible the two of them had wisened up to the danger of leaving Geese behind after yesterday.

A guard could finish Geese off if he was by himself. I didn’t have to be there. It didn’t have to be me.

It was getting to the point where the Fighting God might well run out of patience and jump over alone.

My trump card still hadn't come.

***

On the fourth day, the sun came up, and the Fighting God along with it. He was alone, as I'd predicted. He came over at a running jump, like the Ogre God, then stuck fast to a point a little below the wall. As I'd expected. Everything was as I'd planned. The moment I saw that Geese wasn't on the Fighting God's back, I released a spell at the other side of the ravine, casting Flashover over a wide area. The forest was swallowed by flames in an instant. I couldn't tell if it got to him. I didn't have time to scan the burning forest for a body. I kept the blaze of the burning trees in the corner of my eye, but I had an enemy in front of me who required my full attention. Using his six arms to climb like a spider, the Fighting God scaled the wall at a shocking pace. Cliff and I fired Stone Cannons and giant water bombs at him to try and knock him off, but it was like trying to hold back the tide. The Fighting God flew up the wall at blistering speed.

"Cliff! It's no good! Fall back! Ruijerd! Get us out of here!"

"Understood!" Ruijerd grabbed me and Cliff and jumped down from the wall. We didn't wait for the Fighting God to get over the wall—the moment we hit the ground, I used magic to send the towering wall crashing down into the ravine.

It did us no good. The wall began to crumble away with aching slowness, then exploded all at once as though by dynamite. Great hunks of rock flew through the air, and among them, a golden suit of armor. I used magic to clean up the boulders that came raining down on us, never taking my eyes off the Fighting God. He alighted at a point less than five meters away from me with a grunt. Then, he slowly turned to face me.

"Let's pick up where we left off," he said. He folded his upper arms, put his lower hands on his hips, and pointed at me with the middle hand. Badigadi was looking at me. "I am Fighting God Badigadi! Friend to the Man-God, and heir to the name of fighting god! Rudeus Greyrat, I challenge you to a duel!"

"I have a question!" I shouted quickly. I knew he might just tell me not to waste my breath, but I said it anyway. “Your Majesty! Why have you joined forces with the Man-God? What do you mean you’re his friend?! Were you not deceived by him once before?”

“Indeed I was, boy! He tricked me saying it was to save Kishirika from dying at Laplace’s hand! I donned this armor, then I killed Laplace, but did Kishirika a mortal wound in the process!”

“Then why?!”

“The Man-God came to me on his knees to say he was sorry for that! Not only that, but he begged I lend him my strength! I could not say no after that!”

The Man-God apologized? No way. That bastard would never apologize. Or if he did, he’d just smirk and be like, *Tee hee, I’m sooo sorrrrry.*

“He’s going to deceive you again!”

“I care not! Should it be so, he need only apologize, and I will forgive him! I am immortal, and Kishirika regenerated! If he apologizes, then I have no quarrel with him! What more could I ask for?”

You’re too generous.

He had a pretty good point, in my opinion. I thought you should forgive people for petty dishonesty, too. Only, I didn’t have the luxury of writing off the death of a family member as “petty.” I wasn’t an immortal demon. I saw the world differently. From Badigadi’s perspective, Kishirika was always going to regenerate.

“Don’t suppose you’d betray him and come over to our side?”

“Never! I was never an ally of the Dragon God. However, if you win this battle, I shall consider it!”

He was telling me to fight and take what I wanted. He and Atofe were alike in this area. Come to think of it, the first time I’d met this demon king had been at a dueling arena. Had I won back then or lost? It had ended with me earning Badigadi’s respect, in any case. That’d be why he treated me well. To a demon king, that had to be what it meant to fight.

“All right. I accept your challenge.”

The thing was, Badigadi had forgotten to say “single-combat” this time.

“All of us here will be your opponents.” From the bushes behind me emerged Eris, Elinalise, Zanoba, and Dohga. Joining them came the Superd who had been guarding the rest of the ravine. It was time for all-out war.

***

Frontline tanks: Dohga and Zanoba. Frontline attackers: Eris and Ruijerd. Middle supports: Elinalise and the Superd warriors. Backline attacker: me. Backline healer: Cliff. Standard party formation and standard tactics.

The basic plan was that Dohga and Zanoba would take attacks while Eris and Ruijerd doled them out. Elinalise and the Superd warriors, who were outclassed in fighting power, would go around behind Badigadi from time to time to throw him off. For everyone except Zanoba and Dohga, a single hit was potentially fatal. Honestly, a direct hit would be potentially fatal even for those two, but they'd cover each other to avoid taking any. They might still break some bones or something along those lines, but Cliff and I would heal all of that. Cliff was our dedicated healer. I did some healing while firing off Stone Cannons here and there to deal damage to the Fighting God and divert his attacks. I couldn't see Badigadi with the Eye of Foresight, but by cutting off mana to the Eye of Distant Sight, I could use the Eye of Foresight to watch my allies and predict their movements that way. I'd never done anything like this before. I'd never practiced it or drilled it.

Yet for some reason, it worked. I felt like I was fighting with one eye closed, but I could still read Badigadi and my allies' movements. If anything, it seemed like my movements were smoother than usual. Maybe that was because my primary role here was providing support, or maybe it was because Badigadi's movements were so straightforward. He certainly didn't have Alexander's technique; Alexander had fought Eris, Ruijerd, and Sandor three-on-one and barely taken a hit. Not Badigadi, though—beyond just being outnumbered, he was also taking practically every hit. This was good. My opponent's movements were clearly telegraphed and I caught every last one.

Only, I couldn't see how to end it.

Badigadi was taking all our attacks, so at a glance, it might *look* like we were winning. It might *look* like we were dealing decent damage. But it only looked that way. Every time Eris cut him apart or Ruijerd stabbed him through, the wounds repaired right away. The gold armor writhed like a living thing to cover the holes as soon as they appeared. He was probably recovering inside the armor too. In other words, he'd taken no damage, and he wasn't tired. We wouldn't have a situation like with Alexander where he looked like he was winning easily while, in reality, he was getting more and more tired. The battle was only going to turn further against us as it went on. There was no hope of winning, but we could hang on. So long as our formation held and no one went down suddenly, we could hang on. Who knew where that would get us? But it was all we could do.

And that meager amount proved too much. The first to go down were, of course, the Superd warriors. They weren't weak by any means, but they were a few levels below Ruijerd, and they hadn't fought in a real battle for the past few hundred years. Some of them might not even have been born at the time of the Laplace War. The warriors who'd only ever hunted Invisible Wolves couldn't keep up in a battle with the Fighting God. One after another, they dropped out of the battle in rapid succession. Some had clearly died instantly, others were badly wounded but would still fight if healed. Others, I couldn't tell. There had been ten of them when the fight began, but now they were down to three.

We lost Elinalise next. She certainly wasn't weak either. As far as technique went, she was in the top ranks of adventurers. She was good enough to frontline in an S-Rank labyrinth, and her defensive skill with a shield was unmatched. That ranking was against other adventurers, though. Her specialty was aggro-control, skillfully deflecting attacks with her shield, then piling on low-damage attacks. But she had lost her trusty shield. I'd made her a backup with earth magic, but Fighting God Badigadi's attack easily broke through her deflection technique, throwing her through the air so she went crashing into a large tree. She blacked out. After that, it all fell apart. Cliff was thrown when Elinalise went down, and in that moment of distraction, he was caught by the Fighting God's charge. He went flying like he'd been hit by a truck and disappeared into the bushes. Whether he was dead or just critically injured I couldn't tell, but he didn't come back. At minimum, he'd been knocked out.

With Cliff unconscious, Zanoba and Dohga, who he'd been healing, were unable to hold on any longer. Between my support with Stone Cannon and Elinalise's cover, we'd made sure they were only taking one of every few attacks. Now, they were taking almost every single one. With my healing magic, they were enduring it, but no more than that. Running over to them every time the Fighting God sent them flying, healing them, and sending them back into the fray was impossible for me on my own. If I'd even had the Magic Armor Version Two, maybe I could have done it, but in my own body? Unable to don a battle aura? No matter how much I sped myself along with wind magic I was still too slow. Always one step behind. Our timing got more and more out of sync until both Zanoba and Dohga were sent flying as a pair. At the same moment, the Fighting God targeted Eris. Ruijerd covered her, but that put him out of the battle. I rushed to heal Dohga, then ran to Zanoba's side, but I was too slow. Our line was in shambles. Dohga was sent flying, then, as I was healing Zanoba, I saw the fighting God hit Eris straight on with his fist. She collapsed, coughing up blood. *She's fatally wounded!* screamed a voice in my head. *You have to heal her right now or it'll be too late!* But I was too slow. The Fighting God was closing in on me and Zanoba.

"Rroooaaaah!" Zanoba howled.

He blocked the Fighting God's right upper punch, then his left. He took a punch from one of the lower arms in the gut, doubling over. Next, a punch from the middle arms got him in the temple, and he was thrown off to one side. Next, the Fighting God rounded on me. By the time I'd thought, *Oh, shit!*, it was too late. The punch caught me as I was trying to cast Shock Wave to push myself back. It was one of the middle arms. I immediately tried to block it with my arm, but it was a pointless gesture. The impact was so intense I thought my upper body would be torn apart—and I sailed into the air myself. I'm not sure if it was good luck or bad that I didn't lose consciousness. I could feel that all my bones from my shoulder down to my ribs were broken, and maybe my spine, too, because I couldn't feel my legs. I couldn't move. Possibly the shock had been so great that my brain had cut out all pain signals. I'd simply lost all sensation.

Gasping, I immediately cast healing magic on myself, then stood up. The sight that greeted me was like a scene out of hell. Not a single person was left standing. After I'd gone down, the Fighting God had done away with the remaining Superd warriors. It was sheer carnage. I'd made the wrong call on when to pull out, and now, we couldn't even retreat. Thinking back, we should have fallen back the moment Elinalise went down. I should have seen that we couldn't hold out any longer and gone back to the Superd village. Then, I should have left the rest to Orsted. But it was too late for regrets.

The Fighting God stood to confront me, the last one standing.

"Any final words?"

"Honestly, I'd like to beg for my life."

"You may try, though I would not hold out hope that your pleas will be heard. The Man-God desires your death."

I want to find a moment to heal Eris, I thought groggily. It didn't look like

I was going to be granted that. Wasn’t there another way?

If I kept Badigadi distracted for five minutes—hell, three would do—just time enough to dash to Eris’s side. I’d settle for Cliff waking up and healing someone. Wasn’t there something, anything, I could do?

“Okay, you can have my life. In exchange…would you please spare my family?”

“Oho? Family, you say?”

“I don’t think your Majesty is aware, but I have children now. All four of them healthy.”

“Children are a fine thing. I’d like some of my own with Kishirika one day.” Badigadi nodded. “Very well. But know that if any of them rises against me, I shall show no mercy.”

“Of course.”

After I was dead, the Man-God would go after my children, but now, he wouldn’t have Badigadi helping him. Getting that promise from him would have to do for now. Even if it might not mean anything in the end…

This was my final job.

“Fwahahaha, haaahahahahahahaha!” Badigadi cackled, raising his fist. “Farewell, then, boy!”

At this, I raised both of my hands. As my final act, I could at least hit him with the strongest Stone Cannon I could—

“Get down!”

I threw myself down on all fours like a dog. Something even lower to the ground than I was passed by in the corner of my vision. It shot between the Fighting God’s legs, then stopped behind him. It had gray skin, animal ears, and a cat-like tail. A black wolf. It had sliced through the Fighting God’s legs around the knees, and for a moment, his balance faltered—but only for a moment. The armor repaired itself straight away, and his fist came down undeterred.

Just then, a long skirt fluttered above me. I was being straddled.

“Hmph!” As the Fighting God swung his fist down, he disappeared from my view. I felt something large get blasted away into the sky somewhere behind me. A little later there was a rumble as something hit the ground. What had happened? All I could see was the inside of this long skirt, and, above me, a pair of pale blue panties. The owner of said panties seemed familiar, though I couldn’t place them. But the other one, the wolf? I knew that wolf. I’d seen them before. As if I could forget! That way of moving, that sandy hair, that red-brown skin—plus the waving tail and animal ears.

“Ghislaine!” I cried. That meant the one with black hair had to be Isolde! Water Emperor Isolde! Ghislaine and Isolde had been working together!

“Sylphie!”

Sylphie came darting onto the battlefield like a mouse. She went over to the fallen and simply laid her hands on them. It only took that much for their wounds to heal. Before I knew it, she'd healed Dohga and Zanoba. She was using unvoiced casting. Until now, I hadn't really considered that it had this advantage—I hadn't had the chance. Now I saw it, it was clear as day. She was crazy fast. Faster than me and Cliff together. As I watched, Eris and Ruijerd emerged from the bushes and returned to the battlefield, and before I knew it, our line of battle was back on its feet. Isolde took the main shield position with Dohga and Zanoba relegated to sub-shields. Eris, Ghislaine, and Ruijerd were our attackers. And now, we had Sylphie and her unvoiced healing magic as our healer. Our battle line was standing.

We'd made it out of hell.

"Rudy!" Sylphie called. "I'll hold him down here, so you get to the village! Roxy's waiting for you there!"

"Got it!" With that, I set off running for the Superd village at an all-out sprint. I ran harder than I ever had in my life.

Sylphie had come. Even though I'd brought the bridge over the ravine down, she was here. That meant she must have come from the village, and *that* meant that the card I'd been keeping in reserve had arrived at last. Jumping over tree roots and plunging on through the trees, I finally made it back to the Superd Village. What I saw there filled me with joy. The moment I entered the village, there it was, in the distance. The thing I'd been holding out for sat on top of the teleportation circle I'd drawn up in preparation in the back of the village. I kept running as fast as I could.

"Big Brother!"

"Grand Master!"

"Oh, Big Bro…"

On the way, I passed Norn, Julie, and Aisha, but I ignored them. I just kept running until I reached it. A girl sat on the ground near the broken teleportation circle. She looked exhausted.

"Roxy!" I cried.

She looked up at me. "Oh, Rudy." There were dark rings under her eyes, like she was out of mana or hadn't slept in days. "I'm so sorry. I messed up the procedure. I dug it out, then after I'd gotten it up, I started working on the teleportation circle. If I'd drawn the teleportation circle first, then had you dig it up, I wouldn’t have been so late…”

“That’s fine! It’s all fine! You got here in time!”

Behind her was a giant set of armor.

Three meters tall and dark blue, its right hand was equipped with the Gatling gun and its left with a shotgun. Besides that, there was a magic sword with the power to ignore all defenses clenched in its fist. The armor was as thick and hefty as a sumo wrestler's body; it was lying face down. It didn't look that different from the Version One, but this was not the Version One. This armor, gotten ready just in case of an occasion such as this, was my honest-to-god trump card. It was a weapon for short, decisive battles. Increasing its mana consumption several times over gave it massively improved mobility and armor. In concept, it was the inverse of the Version Three, and so we'd named it—

"This is the Magic Armor Version Zero," Roxy said.

This was my ace up my sleeve. My trump card. If I couldn't win with this… Scratch that. Useless way of thinking about it. The odds were against me regardless.

"I'll be back soon, Roxy!"

"Good luck in the battle, Rudy!"

I got into the Version Zero. The sensation of so much mana being drawn out of me made me a little dizzy as I stood up. Then, I saw Orsted standing in the center of the village. He was holding a gigantic sword.

"Rudeus! Use it!" he shouted, then tossed the great blade to me like it weighed nothing at all. I caught it. It was just the right size for a three-meter-tall suit of armor. Even I, with my clumsy swordsmanship, could feel the awesome power it contained just by holding it.

This was the King Dragon Blade, Kajakut.

"Sir Orsted! I'll be back soon!" I called. Orsted didn't reply, only nodded.

Pushing the Version Zero as hard as it would go, I sped back to the battlefield.

Chapter 3:
The Fifth Turning Point

WHEN I GOT BACK, Eris and the others were holding up just fine. They'd lost me and the Superd warriors, and Cliff and Elinalise were still not there, but things had stabilized. Ghislaine dashed about the battlefield, practically on all fours. The sweet spot of the Fighting God's fist was high—he was a tall guy—so she kept low to the ground to avoid the range of the blast of wind it generated, slashing at him from the front, side, and back to assist the others. Ghislaine didn't have enough offensive power, but from the way the Fighting God was waving his arms around, she was giving him a hard time.

Sylphie's presence was similarly massive. The situation called for faster recovery, so her unvoiced healing magic was a perfect fit. When the Fighting God sent Zanoba or Cliff flying, she'd be at their side and have them back on their feet in an instant. Sylphie had been off active duty for a long time now, so I thought she'd struggle to keep up with the physical demand, but she was single-handedly doing as much healing as Cliff and I had combined.

I suppose I should give special mention to Isolde. She was out in front of the rest, deflecting all the Fighting God's attacks against her and striking back with her own. She moved with grace and precision. Her technique made the Fighting God's violent blows—any one of which could've been lethal—look like a child's tantrum.

Obviously, she wasn't going to defeat him like that. No matter how many flowing strikes she hit back at the Fighting God with or how many times she sliced into his arms or his legs, she didn't do any damage. In a one-on-one battle, she might have given him a good fight, but she'd never have won. At some point, she'd get tired, and then it'd be over.

When it came to buying time until I made it back, though, her presence was worth its weight in gold.

"Sorry for taking so long!" I called out to Sylphie.

"Rudy…! All of you, fall back!" At her signal, they all put distance between themselves and the Fighting God.

"Well, well." Badigadi didn't try to follow them, didn't even spare them a glance. His eyes were on me.

We were about the same size. The Fighting God Armor was about two and a half meters tall. The Magic Armor was about three meters tall. Those few dozen centimeters meant I was only a little taller, and because I'd stopped to stand about ten meters away from him, it wasn't enough to look down on him.

"That must be the Magic Armor that my dear sister bestowed upon the Dragon God in recognition of his worth!"

"Um…" I said hesitantly. "You saw the Version Once back at the port town, right?"

"Did I now?"

"Yup, only then you smashed it to pieces in a single blow."

I thought back on that single blow. I'd taken the full impact because I'd overestimated my defenses, but still, it was amazing that Eris and Ruijerd were still alive after taking hits like that. It had to be the difference having a battle aura made to your defensive strength…though in that case, I had to worry about Cliff. He hadn't taken a direct punch, but it wasn't like he could cloak himself in the protection of a battle aura in the event that he did.

"You said 'Version One'. I take that to mean that this armor is different?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out," I said, looking around me. The others were standing around watching me from afar. Though there was a solid distance between us, they could still get caught in the crossfire.

Oh, right. Sylphie was going around the remaining wounded.

I'd trust her with Cliff for now.

"Shall we get this show on the road?"

The battle commenced.

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My Stone Cannon stood in for a starting bell to kick off the fight. I backed away, shooting Stone Cannons, with Badigadi hot on my heels. I was following the same pattern as my fight with Orsted: retreat and fire off Stone Cannons indiscriminately. Honestly, I'd thought it'd be a struggle to pull off that much, but the lumbering bulk of the Version Zero moved like a dream when I fed mana into the King Dragon Blade. This was what gravity manipulation felt like, huh? I felt like I could do anything with the sword in my hand—only, seeing as I hadn't trained with it, I'd settle right now for making myself lighter.

"Fwahahahaha! I've had worse mosquito bites!" The Fighting God came after me, splintering trees and gouging holes in the earth. It was plain to see that my attacks weren't doing much. Even at this close range, the Fighting God didn't bother to dodge or deflect the Stone Cannons. They plunged straight into him then fell out of his back. He hadn't taken any damage, or at least, that was how it looked. Orsted had said Stone Cannon might work, but it was doing nothing.

"Turning tail and running away, are you?" Badigadi called after me.

I had some other things in mind. Once I'd led him where I wanted him, I aimed the shotgun at his feet, leaving a giant crater in the ground under his next step.

Badigadi stumbled. For a split second, he lost his balance. That's when I closed.

"Guh?!"

I emptied the Gatling gun, then struck with the sword mounted on the back of my right hand. It sliced through the armor like a hot knife through butter, exposing black flesh.

"Shotgun Trigger!" I bellowed, then fired. The blast sent Badigadi's arm flying clean off.

"Fwahahaha! Payback time!"

I'd taken four hits myself. The Magic Armor shook all over from each impact, and I slid around ten meters back.

But I was okay. I'd managed to withstand a direct hit.

"Oof!" Straight away, I wheeled around and went to retrieve Badigadi's arm. It pulsated inside the golden gauntlet. I tossed it away.

"Fwahahaha! Futile, all futile!" Badigadi's arm regrew, popping right out of his shoulder…like a certain race of green aliens. "Hmph."

Oh, but it hadn't been futile. His new arm was bare—it wasn't covered by the armor.

"Oho! That's how we're doing this, are we? You've thought this through, boy!"

Now, on the ground where I'd thrown the arm, there was a magic circle ready to go. The arm and the armor lay there and didn't start regenerating. Maybe it was my imagination, but Badigadi looked like he'd shrunk.

I hadn't thought this through. I'd just guessed.

The power of the Fighting God Armor made Badigadi faster and stronger, but he wasn't that much faster than the master sword fighters I'd met. Orsted could outpace him, and maybe Alec, too. He was way faster than me usually, but I was wearing the Magic Armor; he wasn't so fast that I couldn't handle him. I was making good use of the experience I'd built up training with Orsted and Eris.

It was his extremely strong defense and durability that were frustrating me. The Fighting God Armor was hard. It might have been tougher than the Magic Armor—it was at least tough enough that Eris and the others might scratch it if they attacked with all their strength, but they had no chance of cutting off his head or limbs. The armor restored itself instantly and went on fighting like nothing had happened. Under normal circumstances, the person inside the armor would go on taking damage…but Immortal Demon King Badigadi couldn't die.

The damage from Eris's sword and Ruijerd's spear should have penetrated the armor, but they did nothing against Badigadi. Whether they slashed, stabbed, or struck him, Badigadi healed instantly. Before long, the attackers would grow tired and then, they'd be easy pickings for the destructive power of those six arms.

How were we going to beat him? Atofe had given me a hint. The figure of Immortal Demon King Atofe, rising again to stand against her foes no matter how many times she was struck down, stood for all the demon kings of the Demon Continent as a symbol of fear. There were two ways to beat her. The first was to cut all her limbs off and seal them so that they didn't regenerate. This was the most conventional method. She'd been brought down twice this way in the past. It would take some heavy-duty barrier magic if you wanted to keep her sealed away for centuries, but simply fencing her in with advanced-level magic barriers would prevent her from coming back.

The second way was to make her admit defeat. Immortal Demon King Atofe had her own rules that she usually fought by, and when she saw she'd lost by those rules, she'd surrender. Unfortunately, I didn't see Badigadi giving up so easily. I decided we'd go with the first method.

I had Cliff set up barrier magic circles throughout the forest in advance. They'd activate when I threw one of Badigadi's limbs into them. I'd been worried that they wouldn't work on the Fighting God Armor, but it hadn't been a problem. My plan was to use this defense-negating sword to cut through the armor, tear his arms off, then seal them away. When I'd taken care of all six arms, I'd make Badigadi admit defeat. What I really wanted was to seal his whole body…but without Cliff, I couldn't use that Magic Circle.

"Gaaaah!" I bellowed, charging. I no longer cared about dealing damage. I didn't know how much longer the Version Zero would keep running at full power. Maybe the King Dragon Blade had extended its uptime a little, but it still could power down at any moment. I had to keep this battle short and decisive.

"Come, then, champion!" The Fighting God spread his arms wide as I closed in on him, sending his fist swinging around to meet me. I thrust my sword out in response to the incoming fist, meaning to counter. The agility of those six arms was mind-boggling, but after the last battle, I sort of knew what to expect. Today, I was on form.

I could dodge them.

I cut into his lower left arm, jamming the barrel of the shotgun into the incision as I did so. I fired, and the arm was blasted off. Unfortunately, I couldn't help leaving myself open for a split second. As the arm tore away, another fist plowed into me, and I went shooting back.

"Ngh!"

A crack split the front of the Magic Armor. In the end, it couldn't withstand the fists of the Fighting God. Still, I could ignore the unarmored arms.

Four more to go. My armor only had to last until I'd taken them all off.

I started. Something else had caught my eye.

The barrier. In our last exchange of blows, the aftermath of the battle had scraped the magic circle off the ground. It had happened so easily I couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to me. Some magic circles remained, but I didn't know how many or where they were.

"Damnit!" I choked out, then quickly hurled the arm as far as I could throw it. It sailed off down into the Earthwyrm Ravine. It had taken Atofe a while to recover after she'd been cut into pieces. By putting distance between Badigadi and his severed limbs, he wouldn't be able to restore them right away. They'd come back eventually… But it had to be worth something to make that feat take longer.

Hm? For some reason, the armor wasn't regenerating. Did it become nonoperative when separated from the wearer, even if it wasn't sealed? Had long years of disuse even caused the Fighting Armor to lose some of its performance? Lousy excuse for regeneration, if so.

Or was this all Badigadi's ruse?

Never mind. Now wasn't the time for pointless worrying. His failure to regenerate was an opportunity. The only thing to think about was cutting off the rest of those arms.

"Grr…" Badigadi grumbled, but no new arm sprouted from the stump. Instead, the arm he'd regenerated earlier retracted into the armor like a turtle going into its shell.

"Eh?!"

What's going on?

In a second, two of the remaining four arms disappeared into the body of the armor, gauntlets and all. Then, the last two arms grew thicker. There was a straining metal noise as they swelled.

Okay, the last two arms were bigger now. Too difficult to cut? No, I could manage it. This sword hit more effectively against tougher targets. The Fighting God could strengthen his arms and reinforce his defenses all he liked and it wouldn't matter.

Making a split-second decision, I kicked off and charged at the Fighting God. An alarm bell was ringing somewhere in my mind, but I ignored it. Whatever Badigadi did now, I'd already laid my trump card on the table. My mana was getting closer to zero with every passing moment. Unless I attacked, I couldn't win.

"Gaaaah!"

I yelled. Shouting helped generate power. I squashed my fear and uncertainty and let a little courage show on my face. It was the little bit of courage I needed to plunge in further. It enabled me to charge in, like Eris did, toward victory.

I rammed into the Fighting God. He absorbed the impact, but he stumbled. I swung my right fist. It bit into his left arm and out the other side. Then, I stabbed with my left, pushing the shotgun into the gash.

“Shotgun Trigger!” I shouted, and Badigadi’s Fighting Armor-encased arm went flying. Only, I was knocked back too. Badigadi had punched me with his one remaining arm. The front surface of my armor was smashed to pieces, and the impact had penetrated through it. I felt like my body was going to be crushed flat. I fell backward.

“Hurgh…rghh…” Blood bubbled up from my throat. My heart was screaming, *Not yet!* But it was no good. He’d outplayed me. I hadn’t seen it coming. He’d merged his arms together to make his attacks stronger. Lose an arm, win the war, so to speak. He’d driven his fist into the crack in the Magic Armor with unerring precision and shattered it. Why hadn’t that occurred to me when I saw his arms get thicker? Was I a moron?

No, you’re fine. This is okay. You’d have done the same thing even if you’d seen it coming.

I charged in thoughtlessly and I’d ended up cutting one arm off.

I’d taken some heavy damage…but it wasn’t over yet. There was still one arm left.

Then, to my shock, I realized I wasn’t moving. The Magic Armor felt heavy. And my wounds weren’t healing. Right next to where my body sat in the Magic Armor, there was a part that was essentially its core. Breaking that would cause the armor to lose mobility. It wouldn’t stop moving entirely, mind. It wasn’t so simple a machine. Still, it would be massively limited. Fatal in a battle like this.

Panicking, I sent out mana. Right, I had mana left. I could still move, I wasn’t fully drained. I could fight. So why wasn’t I moving?

“A good plan, and such spirit…” While I lay there, unable to move, Badigadi approached. “And you gave me a good fight. Farewell, Rudeus. Not even Laplace dreamed of such an elaborate scheme.”

He raised his cannon-like fist above his head, then brought it swinging—

“Guh!” Badigadi grunted as something red rammed into him from the side. Whatever-it was slashed at his arm, severing it at the shoulder and sending it flying off through the air.

“Grr!”

There was only one red something in this forest: Eris. Could it be? Had she followed me? Had she been at my side this whole time—here with me?

I didn’t know. No other support arrived. Eris had come charging in alone. A moment later, I noticed something off. It was her sword. Eris’s sword was broken. The famed Phoenix Dragon Sword had snapped off at the hilt. Of course. Up until now, any damage we’d done to the outside of the armor hadn’t been enough to cut Badigadi’s arms off. She’d forced her sword to cut straight through. *Any* sword would break.

“Gyaaaah!” Her sword broken, Eris refused to stop. She faced down the Fighting God as though she hadn’t even noticed, howling all the way. Looking around, I saw she wasn’t alone. Following her out of the forest, one after another, came Sylphie, Ruijerd, Ghislaine, and Isolde. But they were too slow.

“Only a fool would dare to stand in my way alone!” Badigadi said, advancing on Eris. There was no one to protect her. Without hesitation, I activated the escape circuits and ejected from the Magic Armor. Strapped on its back was a sword.

The moment I gripped the hilt, a feeling of awesome, unlimited power rushed through my body. The sword contained a staggering volume of mana. It was a sword crafted specifically to make a person into a hero. I poured yet more mana into it, trying to wring out every last drop I had left.

I doubted I could use it myself. But a member of my family was standing in front of me with a broken sword raised before her, growling with her teeth bared, and all to protect me.

I threw the blade to her.

“Eris!” The magic sword flew in a lazy curve through the air to where Eris turned and caught it.

It was the King Dragon Blade Kajukut, renowned for being the most powerful sword in the world, and the greatest of the magic swords forged by the great demon bladesmith Julian Harisco.

Eris raised it high above her head.

“Gyaaaaaah!”

“Hrm? Surely not…!”

She brought the blade down. In the split second before it made contact, the Fighting God’s body floated into the air.

The blade sliced into him with a flash of light that blotted out my vision.

The ensuing explosion blew out my eardrums.

We were at the mercy of an overwhelming force.

Destruction blossomed.

There was no blast wave, no shock wave. Only silence. The destruction was all directed inward. All that mana driven into the blade became a sphere that enveloped Badigadi. The sword had released not only Eris's strength, but all the mana I had put into it.

I looked into the sphere of mana as it destroyed everything within it while it rose slowly into the air. I watched cracks appear in the Fighting God Armor. It fell to pieces. Badigadi was compressed within the mass of energy and then faded into dust without even a murmur.

I think he struggled, but there was nothing he could do. The Fighting God Armor didn't function, and Badigadi was crushed even as he tried to regenerate.

The sphere vanished. The broken remains of the armor fell into the Earthwyrm Ravine. There were some clangs and clatters as they fell away, bouncing off the cliff walls, and the King Dragon Blade, still impaled in the metal, went with them.

All that remained was the armor. All traces of Badigadi's black flesh had vanished.

For a good while, I stared. I stared both at the now silent ravine, and after the Fighting God Armor that had since vanished from sight. Badigadi's arm lay nearby. It didn't move or even twitch. It definitely didn't look like it was about to start regenerating. Was he dead? Did we win, or was something else coming? Any moment now, was I going to hear a "Fwahaha!" as Badigadi returned?

I stared down into the ravine, wondering. Nothing happened. I saw no sign of anything coming back up. All that was left was silence.

I heard a thud from behind me and turned. Eris had fallen to her knees, her face pale. I rushed over to her. Was she injured? Had Badigadi got in a counterstrike? I reached out my hand, thinking I had to heal her right away, but then I sank to my knees as well.

"Ohh…" It wasn't an injury. I recognized this sensation, as well as the look of Eris's face. This was mana drain. Sucking out all my mana hadn't been enough to satiate the King Dragon Blade Kajakut. It had used up Eris's mana as well. Eris probably hadn't experienced mana drain since childhood. She sank back, blinking.

"Eris."

"Rudeus…" she said. "Your hair's gotten whiter."

I put a hand to my head, although I couldn't tell myself. But returning her regard, I saw that one lock of her hair had turned white as well, like she'd put a streak in it.

"Yours too, Eris."

"Huh… Then I guess we match," she said, then toppled forward. She hadn't fainted. She was only weak after using up all her strength. I wanted to fall on top of her, but I held myself firmly back.

"Rudy!" Sylphie was peering at us, worry in her eyes. She wasn't alone, either. Ruijerd, Ghislaine, Isolde…they were all here.

"Sylphie, where's Cliff?!"

"Um, well, someone else healed his wounds, then Zanoba and Dohga carried him back to the village. All of us here came straight after you, but then I didn't want to get in the way, so I hesitated… But Eris ran in alone—huh?" Sylphie had laid a hand on Eris's prone body, and now she looked puzzled. She'd probably cast a healing spell on sheer reflex. But Eris wasn't wounded, so she didn't get up.

"I think it's mana drain. That sword consumes the mana of whoever wields it."

"Oh. All right, then."

"Anyway, Sylphie, those arms over there—get them to an undamaged magic circle. Then get Eris back to the village. I need you to tell Sir Orsted what happened, then bring Cliff here."

I stood up. The Version Zero was in ruins, and my mana was practically exhausted…but I could still move. I didn't know how much time it would take Badigadi to restore himself. After being crushed by that much mana, the way he'd disappeared looked like he'd been annihilated. And that was practically an understatement. The arms showed no signs of starting to regenerate, so I wanted to believe we had a while. Maybe that was naive. Wishful thinking. Most importantly, the Version Zero was destroyed, and the Version One was gone, too. I was on the verge of mana drain and Cliff, who could cast barrier magic, wasn't here. Badigadi had fallen into the ravine, and we had no way of sealing him. If we went down there in this state and found him waiting for us, our chances of victory were close to nonexistent. There'd be nothing for it but to ask Orsted to take to the field. I wanted to get through this without him using any mana, but I might not have a choice.

I wasn't strong enough.

Still, I'd driven Badigadi into a tight spot. I'd done everything I could. Whether Badigadi was up and about down there in the ravine, I didn't know, but surely I'd brought him as low as it was possible for him to go.

I felt disgust at my own weakness.

"Ruijerd, Ghislaine, and you too, Isolde. Come with me, please."

"Rudy? Where are you going?"

I thought I'd done everything I could, but there was still something else I had to finish. Even with my mana close to exhausted, I had to do it.

"I'm going after Geese."

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We found him straight away. Next to no effort. I didn't even have to use what little mana I had left, it was that easy. The moment we crossed the ravine and entered the flame-blackened forest, there, in the shadow cast by the charred remains of a great tree, we found Geese lying on the ground. His whole body was charred dark by terrible burns. When I'd cast Flashover, it had burnt the forest and him with it. When I first saw him, I thought he was dead. He was so still he looked like a black boulder. But luckily Ruijerd had found him first, and he'd used his third eye to probe further. Geese wasn't dead.

"Geese," I said.

"Hey, boss."

He wasn't dead, but it was clear he would be soon, and I wasn't about to heal him. I was here to do the opposite…although I didn't want to finish him off straight away, either.

"Heh heh. Water magic, earth magic, the Magic Armor… I thought up ways to counter all of 'em, only for this to be what gets me. Didn't know you had a knack for fire magic too, boss. Never once saw you use it."

Geese had all sorts of items on him. He wore a blue vest with a brown band around his middle and something that looked like chainmail. It was hard to tell now, when they were practically burnt to a crisp, but they were presumably precautions against all kinds of magic. I guessed it hadn't been the Fighting God Armor's power that allowed him to survive Electric back in the Third City of Heirulil.

"And now you're here, boss, which I reckon must mean my final plan fizzled…" Geese's scorched cheeks twisted. His final plan? I guess that depended on whether you called sending Badigadi out alone counted as a "plan."

“If any of ’em, the Sword God or the North God, the Ogre God, the Abyssal King…if there’d been just one more, things might’ve been different… None of ’em listened to me, y’know.”

“Well, none of them were the best listeners,” I replied. Geese seemed half delirious.

“Hah, you’re one to talk. Eris, Atofe. That Ghislaine I see over there? You’re surrounded by folks who don’t know how to listen, yerself.”

“Yeah, well… I guess I was lucky.”

“Nah, that ain’t it. It’s ’cause you did things the right way. Told ’em what was goin’ on, won their trust, and then worked hard to make honest allies of ’em all. And that’s why, when push came to shove, they listened right and followed your orders right.”

He might’ve had a point. Atofe and the Ogre God, who I’d only joined forces with because I’d had to at the time, hardly listened to me at all. Sandor and Dohga were exceptions, but Ariel fit the pattern. If I hadn’t been able to build trust with everyone, there would have been more who refused to listen to me.

“Turns out just twistin’ things to make a reason to fight, scroungin’ people together, stirring ’em up, then sneakin’ around nudging ’em behind their backs just doesn’t work…”

Neither the Sword God nor the North God had followed Geese’s instructions. At the end of the day, they put their own interests first. That was why I was alive.

“I thought I knew what was what, but I was wrong. Still, I thought I’d pull it off somehow. Only then it turned the one who really didn’t know…wasn’t me.” Geese laughed. “The Man-God, y’know. He was throwin’ a *real* tantrum a little while ago. ‘Why?! Why?! It’s all *your* fault! Ya stupid ape!’” Geese flashed a careless, mocking smile. “I mean, what’d he expect? Who’s gonna lend an honest hand to a bastard who tricks and sneers at the folks that work their hardest for him?”

“Then…does that mean you cut corners too, Geese?”

“Is that what you think, eh? Was it that easy for you? I gave it my all, I’ll have you know.” Geese coughed and something black like soot trickled from his mouth. “See, Badigadi and I, we’re unusually softhearted. Who else’d help out a guy who screams at his allies for bein’ useless even now? Softies is who.”

The black soot we saw now was like a representation of Geese's soul. I could tell he was growing weaker.

"Thing is though, boss. Even after all that, the Man-God saved me. Yeah, he did some nasty stuff to me too, but when you add it all up, he saved me."

When I didn't say anything, Geese went on. "You wouldn't get that, eh, boss? You can do anythin', go anywhere in the world, all on your own. You wouldn't get what it's like when you just can't do nothin'."

I *did* get it. Or at least, I thought I did. I understood what it was like not to be able to do what everyone else could. Geese was…me. Me as I'd been long ago, only there was one difference. Back then, I hadn't even tried. When I came up against a wall, I just ran away. Geese, on the other hand, really didn't have the ability. In this world dominated by monsters and violence, the most important power was the power to fight, and he didn't have it. He'd learned how to do everything else, but he couldn't survive.

"No, Geese, you're wrong…" I could say he was wrong, but no more than that. I couldn't say that I understood. I didn't want to give him an answer. All I could do was deny it.

"Heh. Hey, Rudeus. If you're gonna tell me I'm wrong, take some pride in it. You won, y'know? Ya beat me. The world says it's winners who get to be right and losers are wrong. So stand up straight and tell me, 'That's wrong, Geese. That ain't how it is.' Then, see, you go on and give me a lecture, seein' as I'm about to die. 'Ya shoulda done it like this, ya shoulda stuck with me and never gone over to the Man-God.' That sorta thing." With that, the strength seemed to go out of him, and he said, his face empty, "Me, Badigadi, and the Abyssal King are all gone. The Man-God's got no one left who'll go outta their way to help him out. He lost. Ain't no one left in this world who can mess with Rudeus Greyrat. In fact, he said himself that if this was a dud, there'd be nothin' he could do to ya. So I reckon he'll quiet down, at least 'til you take him out. Count on it: He'll be sneakin' about behind the scenes, though."

"You're joking, right?" I said, butting it without thinking. Geese didn't smile.

"If that's how ya wanna think, I ain't gonna stop you. I'm only guessing that he'll quiet down, no more. Go on wavin' that 'Down with the Man-God!' flag if you like. It'll be bad for him but not for you, eh?"

I wasn't laughing either.

“Hey, now, what’s the glum look for? You’re Paul’s son, aren’t ya? Paul’d look a bit more cheerful if he were around. Maybe not right before he died, though. He really got older while I wasn’t lookin’… But anyways, take some pride in this already! Rejoice a bit, even if it don’t last. How d’ya think I feel when you don’t? Makes me look like a real moron, after I went all over the world gettin’ the Sword God and the North God and the Ogre God to join me, then getting ’em fired up like, ‘Let’s take him down!’ only for it to all fall to pieces. All ’cause I couldn’t control ’em. At the end I took a risk and sent Badi. Look where that got me. At least remember me as a strong opponent, yeah? That’s how I wanna be remembered.” Before I knew it, Geese was crying. Tears were streaming down his soot-stained face. When I saw that, I knew for sure that he hadn’t held anything back.

“Okay. You were strong, Geese. True, I’m standing here now, but if just one thing had gone awry, I’m pretty sure our places would be reversed. This was the hardest, most brutal fight of my life.”

“Heh… Heh heh. Cheers, Rudeus.”

He had been strong, all right. It had taken me a year to defeat him. For a whole year, I’d prepared…not to mention everything I’d brought to the fight that had been built up over a much longer period. No one could call him weak after all that.

“Geese.” Suddenly, Ghislaine stepped forward. She looked down at Geese. Her bangs hid her face so that I couldn’t read her expression.

“Hey, Ghislaine. Been a while.”

“It has.”

“I’m headin’ on.”

“Yes. Say hello to Paul for me.”

“Gotcha… Maybe, when it’s your time, we can get a drink. I wanna see Paul get drunk again, then stickin’ his face into ya chest and makin’ Zenith sulk…”

“Zenith won’t be going anywhere for a while yet. My time will probably come first.”

“Heh, yeah, I know… Anyway…’til we all…meet…ag…”

Geese fell still. Just like that, something in him was gone, suddenly, even though he hadn’t finished talking.

Ghislaine’s ears twitched, then her tail drooped. “He’s dead,” she said.

Dead. Geese was dead.

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I beat Geese. I could think that now, but as I’d expected, it didn’t make me happy. I was aware I was in shock. There was something about seeing someone I knew die in front of me that I couldn’t process. He was my enemy, and I’d known I had to take him down…but it wasn’t like I’d loathed Geese with every fiber of my being or anything. If we’d lost the battle and they’d killed Eris or someone close to me, I might have ended up loathing him. I might have felt like this was justice. *I took down the bastard. I got my revenge.* That sort of thing. But…

I couldn’t deal with it. All I knew was that I was able to numbly ruminate the way I was because I hadn’t lost a single person in the battle who was important to me. I’d met my victory conditions. I’d wiped out the disciples and kept Orsted in reserve. It’d been a hard fight and there’d been missteps but despite that, it was a perfect victory—rare, for me. Maybe I was trying to use the way Geese had died to mess it up a bit. Perhaps some part of me thought that, if I’d been cleverer, Geese might have come back over to my side.

Thinking about it wasn’t doing any good. At the very least, though, I could take his bones home and make him a grave. Next to Paul’s. That’d be good. He’d said something about being together.

Those were the thoughts running through my head as I watched Geese’s body burn. Ghislaine stared intently at the cremation proceedings. Maybe it was my imagination, but when it was over and we’d recovered the bones, her ears and tail seemed limp.

“Let’s go home.”

“Yeah.”

We crossed the ravine.

Whatever else aside, it was really over this time. I was worn out. I barely had any mana left; I was physically exhausted. If I lay down I’d be out like a light. Not that I could afford to sleep until Badigadi was sealed…

I was eager to get back to Sharia, anyway. I wanted to get a good night’s sleep in my own bed and then wake up to eat. I'd have rice for breakfast… Yeah—here in the Biheiril Kingdom, they had soy sauce. I could make a perfect tamagokake gohan bowl. When I got back, I'd eat. I'd eat until I burst. Then, of course, it'd be time for some sexy shenanigans. Rudeus the Celibate had died with Geese. Sylphie…or Roxy…or Eris…who to pick? Scratch that, how about all three at once? Eris wouldn't like it, but surely it'd be all right to ask her, just this once. Chances like this didn't come along every day, right? Right.

The post-mortem for this battle could wait until later. For now, I'd forget what Geese had said. Now, it was time to rest. I was exhausted.

"Rudeus." As I walked, dragging myself wearily along with every step, I heard a voice from behind me. It was Ruijerd. He was walking at the back of our group and had turned to look behind him. Back at the ravine.

"What's the matter?"

"An enemy."

"What?"

There was a hand clinging to the edge of the ravine. A hand. A hand. Something was climbing up out of the ravine. But what? Never mind, there was no point wasting words on it. The hand shone gold. It wore a golden gauntlet.

"You're kidding."

It was Badigadi.

Surely this was too soon. Wasn't it? Thinking back, I'd thrown a few of his arms into the ravine, then his body after them. His body had appeared to be practically annihilated, but there could have been a few larger chunks here and there…maybe by pulling together the bits that remained, no matter how minute, he'd been able to fast-track his regeneration. Were immortal demon kings *that* immortal…?

As we stood frozen, the armor rose out of the ravine. Only, it looked different now. It only had two arms, which was how it had been when I'd defeated it, but the overall design had changed. The helmet was a different shape, and it was shorter, not even two meters tall. It was also holding a sword. An enormous sword. The world's greatest sword, forged from the King Dragon King.

No. It isn't him. That isn't Badigadi.

"No matter how desperate he becomes, a hero always rises again and turns the tides. That is what I have achieved!"

That voice. The way he said "hero." There was no way I could mistake that calling card.

"I am North God Kalman III, Alexander Rybak!"

He was alive. Huh! I'd really thought he was dead. His body hadn't so much as twitched back when I sent him down here, and yet here he was. He'd survived.

Ah, of course. He had immortal demon blood too. Given time, he could regenerate like Badigadi.

Except—no. A shiver ran up my spine as it all clicked. This was the "final plan" Geese had talked about. Had this been his plan from the start? Or had he changed tack partway through? I'd thought something was off. I'd thought it was strange when the armor didn't regenerate. He'd deliberately prevented it from regenerating. Then, Alec had put it on at the bottom of the ravine and restored himself. Maybe yesterday, when Geese was playing dead, he'd been preparing to drop the Fighting God Armor and part of Badigadi into the ravine and resurrect Alec…

Dammit. There was still more I had to do. There was another battle I had to fight. I was *sick* of this. Couldn't it just be over? Like, give me a break already! An opponent I already beat once coming back for a second round?

Maybe it was my fault. I hadn't made sure that Alec was dead. I'd beaten him and thought that meant I'd finished him off for good, only to leave him there. I could have burned him, at the very least! But no, I'd left him there, and now here we were. What else should I have done in that situation, though? What more could I have given than what I already had?

Well…whatever. What was done was done. What was I going to do *now*? The Version Zero was gone. I had no backup. Ghislaine, Isolde, and Ruijerd, and I remained, with me teetering on the verge of mana drain. I had no weapon and no armor. My hand was empty. There was no hope of winning.

What should I do? How was I supposed to beat North God Kalman III wearing the Fighting God Armor?

Was it time to ask Orsted to step in? As if. What was any of this *for*?

I had to at least weaken him…but how?

As I gaped at him, Alec looked back at me. He didn't seem at all surprised that I was here. It was like he'd expected me to be waiting for him.

"Rudeus Greyrat…" he said. "I apologize for calling you useless. You are a formidable warrior. I would not have thought it from your appearance, but you are a worthy opponent for me. Thanks to you, I have ascended to a new level of power. You have my gratitude."

I turned my weary body toward the golden armor. If I ran, he'd only catch me. I didn't even have enough strength to buy time. I'd go down fighting, then. I'd struggle with everything I had left. Focusing only on that thought, I stepped forward—

"Uh?" I was sprawled on the ground.

"I am invincible now," Alec said. It was seeing the other three fallen around me—Ruijerd, Ghislaine, and Isolde—that made me realize Alex had thrown us all down. He'd knocked us all down in one hit.

"This is my thanks to you for making me stronger, Rudeus. I will let you live."

Searing pain shot through me at last. My legs were broken. He was too fast. I hadn't seen it coming. I hadn't had the Eye of Foresight open, but still. I hadn't been able to react at all. Neither had any of the other three. The Eye of Foresight wouldn't have made any difference. Maybe this was the true power of the Fighting God Armor. When the wearer was stronger, it built upon their strength… Never mind, that wasn't right. It wasn't like Badigadi had been weak. He was plenty strong too. It was simply that when the wearer changed, the armor's performance changed as well. It changed its form to align itself with them… It really was the ultimate armor.

"Farewell," Alec said, walking away.

There was no time to be shocked. I immediately said a spell to heal the other three. They were unconscious. Near death, but not yet dead. Was this Alec's idea of mercy? Damn it all. He still didn't take me seriously. But hey, that wasn't a bad thing. After healing the other three, I cast Earth Fortress to cover them, then went after Alec. I had no plan for what I'd do when I caught him. Had Sylphie made it back to the village? What was Orsted going to do? I didn't have any answers, but Alec was heading toward people I had to protect. Toward Eris, Sylphie, Norn, and all the Superd. I couldn't allow them to be slaughtered. I had no reason not to go after him.

My legs weren't cooperating too well. They trembled, refusing to respond how I wanted them to. But even then, I managed to run. I kept going, following the golden armor.

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The Superd village was too quiet. It was so quiet I wondered when I arrived if everything was already over.

“Why?! Why is there no one here?!” Alec bawled. I passed through the palisade gate and into the village and found it empty. The Superd were gone, as were Julie and Aisha, and Cliff and the others who’d been carried back here for their wounds. Even Sylphie, who was supposed to have been relaying my message to Orsted, was gone. Eris, too. There wasn’t a trace of any of them. All the people had vanished into thin air.

“How can this be?! Isn’t this what Rudeus was defending?!”

It was. I was defending this place.

This was bizarre. Everyone had been here, right before I left! It had been…how much time had passed? It was about three hours from here to the ravine. I’d used the Version Zero to get there, and I’d been in a big hurry, so it had only taken an hour. Then we’d fought Badigadi, searched for Geese, and come back…so five, maybe six hours? Five or six hours ago, everyone had been here. Being in a hurry I hadn’t looked around much, but I was sure they’d all been here.

Except—hold up. Hadn’t there been…too many people? Hadn’t there been some people who had no place being here?

“Curses… You had me completely fooled…” Alec turned around. “Rudeus Greyrat!” Fury radiated from him in waves.

You’ve got it wrong. I don’t know any more than you.

Why would I have come chasing after such a dangerous opponent if Orsted wasn’t even here? That’d be moronic. I’d have run away into the forest, counting my blessings that he’d let me live.

“Orsted and the Superd were never here, were they?”

“Um, no, the Superd were… You saw Ruijerd before, didn’t you?” Getting the feeling he might attack at any moment, I backed away. I had no idea what was going on now. Maybe this was all a bad dream. Maybe the Abyssal

King had survived or something, and everything since we'd defeated Badigadi had been a dream.

"I was going to let you live. No longer. If you are so desperate to fight me to the last, I shall grant your wish…"

Crap. What's going on? I had to run. I had no reason to fight, I had to run. I was about to turn around—then, ice ran down my spine.

My feet stopped moving. Had Alec done something? No, that wasn't it. He was rooted to the spot too.

"Wh-what's this, this cold?" He sounded scared. He was looking around wildly. He had the Fighting God Armor. Why was he so scared?

Why?

Well, because it was a curse. A curse to inspire fear. A curse that specifically didn't work on me. Only, I could tell that the source of the curse was currently seething with murderous rage, and that rage was tied up in some major trauma for me. *That* scared me.

That murderous rage took shape as it emerged from the back of the village. Silver hair, and those awful eyes, the whites shining beneath the gold of his irises. He came walking toward us slowly with a terrifying look on his face.

"Rudeus."

"Sir Orsted…why…?"

It was Orsted. He had his helmet in one hand and tossed it to me now. I hurried to catch it.

"When Sylphiette informed me what had happened, Cliff Grimor was already close to full mana drain. I saw that he would be unable to seal Badigadi and the Fighting God, so I went and begged another man's aid. Hence, my arrival was delayed. Forgive me."

No, not that, I wasn't asking why you're late. I want to know why there's no one here.

"This, however… This, I did not anticipate," Orsted said, then looked at Alec, North God Kalman III, who stood there in the Fighting God Armor. "I shall handle the rest." He stepped forward, and Alec took a frightened step back.

I had no idea what was happening. I only called after Orsted.

“But Sir Orsted, your mana…”

“Enough. There has been enough of that,” Orsted said, shaking his head. “I too have made up my mind.”

“Made up your mind…? About what…?”

He looked at me. His mouth quirked in the thinnest shadow of a smile, then set with almost imperceptible determination. With the most terrifying face in the world, he said, “I wish to see for myself what it is like to fight alongside trusted friends.”

I hadn’t quite followed the beginning and end of the conversation, but for some reason, his words struck me. I understood he’d resolved himself to this battle.

“Okay,” I said at last. “Then I’ll leave you to deal with the rest.” I stepped back. There was nothing more for me to say. I was supposed to be thinking that I couldn’t allow Orsted to fight, and yet I could feel a little smile tugging at my mouth. I’d misjudged a little. Not one thing in particular, exactly. It was just that Orsted had let me in more than I’d thought. He thought of me as his ally on an emotional level, not just in his calculations. He wanted to fight alongside his friends. Not allies. Friends. From now on, he would not be alone, but with me. He wouldn’t use me, but rather stand at my side. Now I knew we couldn’t lose. I’d thought I’d failed to achieve a goal, but I’d won something else.

“Now then, North God Kalman III, Alexander Rybak.”

“So it’s you… You’re Dragon God Orsted.” When Orsted called his name, Alec raised the King Dragon Blade Kajakut. He was wielding both the Fighting God Armor and the King Dragon Blade. They made for a devastatingly powerful combo. He wouldn’t consider tossing just one of them to the side, would he? Was there *anything* I could do here?

“Perfect.” Orsted, it seemed, thought differently. As Alec raised his blade, a smile of confidence flashed across his face. That smile was terrifying enough to turn everything around it to ice.

“With both the Fighting God Armor and the King Dragon Blade, there’ll be no excuses when you lose, will there?”

“You—!” Alec was out for blood now. “Do you mock me?!”

“I do not.” Orsted put his hands together and then slowly drew them apart. Something emerged from the palm of his left hand: it was a sword, and when I saw it, my knees began to knock together. I’d only seen that sword once before. Orsted had only called it the Dragon Blade. All I knew was that it consumed a massive volume of mana.

“My sole desire is to beat you down utterly and to break you.” He held the sword out, pointing it at Alec’s eyes.

Alec’s fury rose to the surface, the air crackling with his wish to see Orsted dead. He raised the King Dragon Blade.

“Try it, then!” he shouted.

Dragon God Orsted faced off against North God Alexander in the Fighting God Armor. The true and actual final battle had begun.

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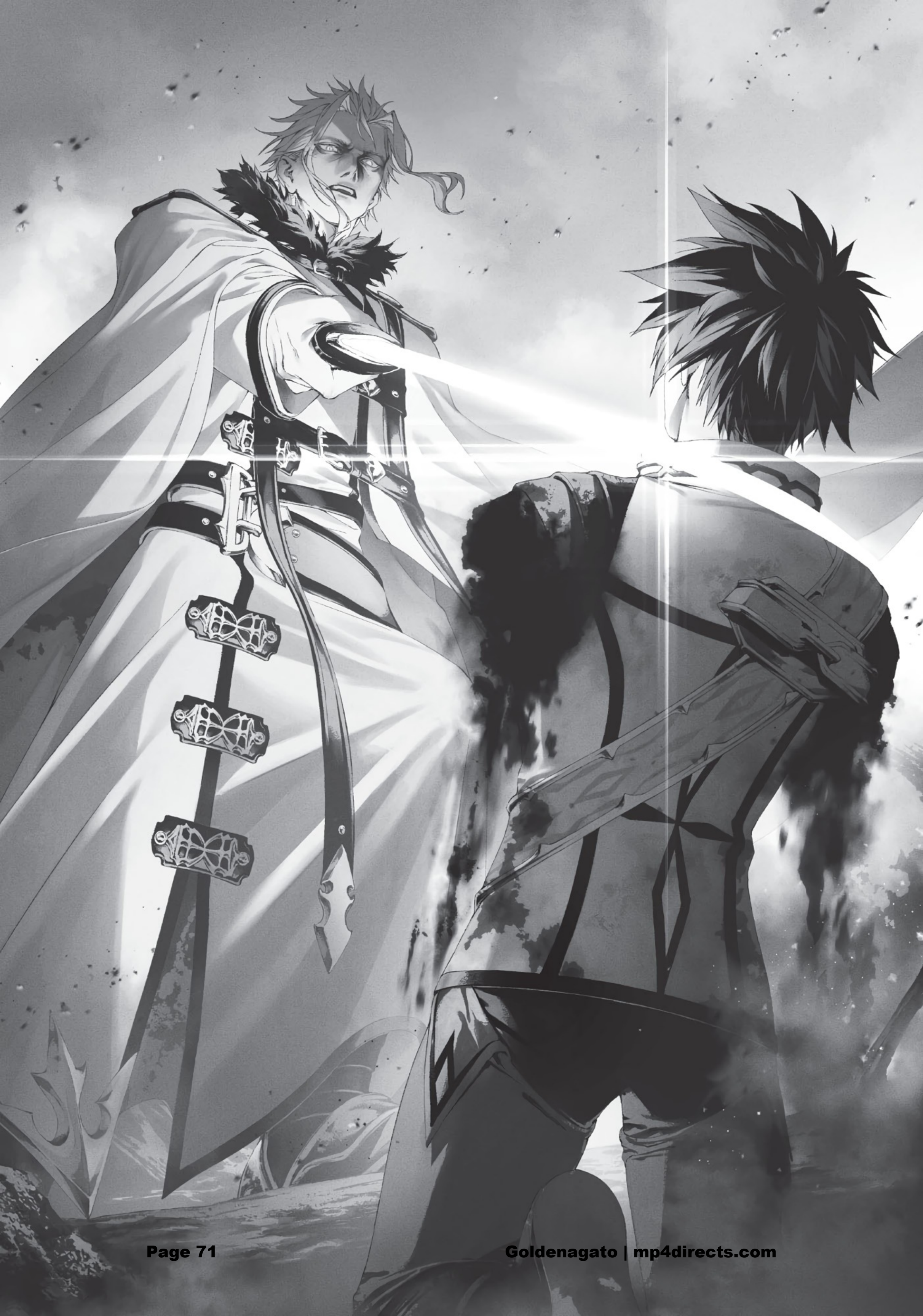
About ten minutes later, around a quarter of the forest around the Ravine of the Earthwyrm was gone. Amid the now scorched and barren wasteland, scattered with mounds of splintered trees, there knelt a boy missing both his arms. A sword pressed into this throat. The boy looked up at its wielder in blank shock. A man with silver hair and distinctive eyes stared back. He didn’t have a scratch on him. Looking at him standing there unscathed, you’d think there hadn’t been a battle at all. The only clue was a spattering of dirt on his clothing.

“Choose. Become my follower or die.”

The Dragon God against the North God in the Fighting God Armor.

That match-up could have been a truly legendary battle. A pair of opponents of that caliber could have gone down in history for good. Sadly, the actual battle was nothing so grand. It was too devastatingly one-sided for that. Honestly? It was tough for me to put it into words. I watched it, getting caught in the melee and narrowly escaping death as I did so, but they moved so fast I could hardly see anything. Even with the Eye of Foresight, I couldn’t tell what either of them were doing. The only thing I saw for sure was that Orsted always had the upper hand. I could tell that every time Alec tried to turn things around, Orsted smashed him into utter submission. He was completely outmatched. Even with the Fighting God Armor and the King Dragon Blade, he couldn’t touch a hair on Orsted’s head. The armor was smashed to pieces, which were now beginning to regenerate, but they had detached from Alec's body. The King Dragon Blade lay on the ground nearby along with his arm.



Alec had long since lost all will to fight. He looked up at Orsted, his face petrified with fear. Tears streamed from his defeated eyes, and his mouth hung half open. The boy who’d boasted of becoming a hero was gone. In his place was a whimpering puppy, its spirit entirely broken.

After a long silence, at last he spoke. “I will become your follower,” he said.

And now, this time, the battle really was over.

Chapter 4:
The End of the Battle

A MONTH PASSED.

I was standing near the edge of the forest in which lay the Ravine of the Earthwyrm. Around me stood simply constructed wooden houses. In a clearing where the trees had been cut down, a jumble of people walked this way and that. There were Superd, human carpenters and laborers hired from the Biheiril Kingdom, woodcutters…and the Ruquag Mercenaries.

"Hey, Big Bro, could I get you to clear a few trees over on the eastern side of the forest?"

Naturally, Aisha was there too. She strode about the village and issued instructions to everyone. After getting her orders, the mercenaries were then under the command of Linia and Pursena. Watching this, you'd be hard-pressed to say who the real company leader was.

"Yeah, no problem." I was working alongside them to rebuild the Superd Village. I cleared trees with magic. Then, I used earth magic to build foundations for houses and a road from the village to the Earthwyrm Ravine. There was lots to be done.

I'm sure you're burning to know why Aisha and the Ruquag Mercenary Band were wandering around here, and why, when Alec showed up, no one was to be found except Orsted.

I guess I'd better explain.

It's a short story: it was all Aisha's scheme. Okay, well, *scheme* sounds like she was getting up to mischief, so let's call it *work*—it was all Aisha's work. When the teleportation circles and communication tablets stopped working, she and the mercenary company had been thrown into chaos. With their lines of contact with far-off nations cut off, unease, then panic set in. Not for Aisha, though. She stayed calm and coolly assessed the situation. They were close to the border. If the fighting had already begun, they wouldn't get there in time, and there wouldn't be much they could do. She concluded that, as there was a strong possibility that Geese might flee the scene, they would work on getting the teleportation circles running again—in other words, restoring infrastructure.

The trouble was that in addition to the teleportation circles, all the magic circles back at the office that corresponded to the spare magic circles she had on her had been destroyed. There was nothing she could do. I'd have given up there, in her shoes. I mean, I *did* give up. But see, Aisha had a brainwave. Her genius brain remembered that a certain individual had a secret technique. This technique allowed one to draw a new magic circle corresponding to a teleportation circle whose pair had been destroyed, and thereby travel to where you wanted to go.

The individual in question…c'mon, you know the answer. It was none other than Armored Dragon King Perugius Dola.

To request his aid, Aisha had hunted down a monument to the Seven Great Powers that stood near the border. When she found it, she used Perugius's flute to travel to the floating fortress. Perugius, knowing that we wanted to help demons, was reluctant, but something about Aisha convinced him.

"I'll link up *one* for you," he said.

Aisha chose to link the magic circle near the border with the teleportation circle that led to the Superd Village.

And so, here we were.

"I'm impressed you got Lord Perugius to agree."

"Yeah, he really didn't want to. But then I told him Orsted would owe him a favor for this battle and he softened up."

After that, while I was busy fighting, she'd traveled to the Superd Village. After hearing what was going on, she used the teleportation circle to evacuate the residents and others to the town near the border… It was a close one. If Roxy, after returning to Sharia, had prioritized the ordinary teleportation circles rather than summoning the Magic Armor Version Zero, it would all have been for nothing. Luckily enough, Aisha had ended up covering Roxy's mistake.

It was just how the cards had fallen. Roxy was still mortified about it.

"Around here?"

"Yeah, just chop 'em all down. Better to make more space than less, right?"

"Fair enough. I'm on it."

"Call me when you're done, okay? I'll get the mercenaries to cart the wood away."

"Yes, sir."

It had been a month since the battle. I'd stayed on alert, ready to fight, but the next battle never came. There wouldn't be another one. So, I'd had Roxy, Sylphie, Zanoba, and everyone else head back to Sharia. Eris was also kind enough to accompany their party under the title of "bodyguard." The magic circle for summoning the Version Zero and the one used in the evacuation had both been destroyed in Orsted's battle with Alec, so I'd asked Perugius to send a decent portion of the party back again. Those who returned would work on rebuilding the office and restoring the communication tablets and teleportation circles. Apparently, nothing had happened in Sharia. Even the elf girl was safe and sound. The worst of the damage was that the weapons and armor kept under the office were buried, along with the detailed documents Orsted had written out every day. The evacuated Superd villagers connected back up with the magic circle in the Second City of Irelil and returned from near the border. After that, the Biheiril Kingdom officially welcomed the Superd. The kingdom was happy to accept them as citizens. It probably helped that after losing the Third City and the Ogre God, they weren't in a position to say no. They did set one condition, which was that to facilitate taking the Superd into the country, a minimum of three Superd be sent from the village to serve the kingdom. This was how it had been when establishing peace with the ogres, reportedly. Those three envoys had been chosen and were now working toward restoring the village. If the restoration continued without any problems, the Superd would have a home in the Biheiril Kingdom before long.

We had defeated the disciples and made the Superd, the ogres, and the Biheiril Kingdom our allies. We'd won. But could this really be called victory?

"Master Rudeus."

"Oh, Sandor." While cutting down trees, lost in my thoughts, Sandor appeared behind me. He wasn't alone, either. Ghislaine, Isolde, and Dohga were with him.

Sandor had come back around ten days after the battle ended. Not only had the Fighting God dealt him a mortal wound, he'd also been thrown into the ocean. He somehow managed to drift to Ogre Island, where he took some time to recover. It was impressive that he'd taken on the Fighting God and made it back alive. Only, when I saw him again, he looked uncomfortable. I guess maybe, when you went by the name of North God Kalman, losing in and of itself was an embarrassment. Or wait, maybe it had nothing to do with that, and he was embarrassed because he'd been acting like such a big shot all the time…

"Hey. What do you need?"

"Oh, nothing—we're planning on returning to Asura soon, you see. So we came to say our farewells."

"Ah. Right."

Their work here was over. They were Ariel's subjects at the end of the day, so if there was no fighting to be done, they had to go home.

"Sandor, thank you," I said. "We'd never have made it this far if not for you."

"Please, it's Queen Ariel you owe your thanks to."

"Sure thing. Please tell Her Majesty to let me know right away if she ever runs into trouble. Tell her I won't hesitate to help."

"Very well."

Sandor, Dohga, Ghislaine, and Isolde. Each of them was at least a King-tier sword fighter. I couldn't thank Ariel enough for sending me such a powerful lineup.

"Thank you too, Ghislaine."

"Don't thank me. By the way…I'm thinking I'll come pay a visit to the grave."

"Understood. I'll be waiting."

Ghislaine left it at that.

"And you, Dohga. I'd have died after falling into the ravine if you hadn't been there, so thank you."

"Uh-huh."

"If you ever have a personal favor I can do for you, please let me know. I want to pay you back for saving my life."

“Uh-huh!”

All Dohga said was “Uh-huh,” but he seemed a little sad to be parting.

“And thank you, Isolde. If you hadn’t stood between me and the Fighting God, I’d be dead.”

“Not at all! It was a highly educational battle. I should be thanking you.” Isolde bowed gracefully, then grinned. From her face to the way she held herself, she was as beautiful as ever. It made me wonder what the men of Asura were thinking if this woman were still single.

“And please give my best to the medical team,” I said.

“I will. If that is all…we will take our leave.” Sandor bowed, then turned. As he did so, however, I remembered something I’d forgotten to say and called it out after his back.

“About Lady Atofe—I’m sorry.”

Sandor had come back, but he was the only one. Atofe was still missing. She must have been swept away by the ocean. She wouldn’t be found for centuries, and the same was true for Moore.

“You needn’t worry about my mother,” Sandor said at last. “One of these days she’ll pop up where you least expect it. It’s the Ogre God I really feel bad for.”

“Yes… True.”

The Ogre God had been confirmed dead. He had fought well against the Fighting God, but he wasn’t an immortal demon. In the end, his strength had failed, and he had died. And after we’d managed to reconcile. It really was too bad.

“Still, it does no good to lament the dead.”

“I agree. We have to look forward.”

I’d made the Ogre God a promise. If he died, I would protect the surviving ogres. They weren’t in any danger at the moment, but even if it was only a promise, I wanted to keep my word if a threat reared its ugly head.

“Farewell, then,” Sandor said.

“Yes. Thank you for everything.”

“Ah, one more thing… Watch out for Alec for me.”

At length, I said, “I will.”

Sandor left. No sooner had he gone than I saw Cliff walking up. Elinalise was with him.

“Rudeus.”

“Cliff.”

“Are they going home, too?”

“They are. Are you leaving as well, Cliff?”

“Yeah. Seeing as everything seems to have wrapped up… We never did get to the bottom of what caused the plague, but seeing as a month has passed without any further outbreaks, and they’ve changed where they live…I’m going home, for now.”

I was just as indebted to Cliff as the others. We couldn’t have cured the plague without him…even if it was technically the work of the Abyssal King rather than a true plague.

“Thank you, Cliff. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t come…”

“It’s you we’re talking about. I’m sure you’d have worked something out yourself. Call me if there’s another outbreak.”

“I will… Cliff, I’ve done nothing but rely on you. I don’t even know to best thank you.”

“I can only leave Lise and Clyde to go do my best work in Millis because your family are there to look after them in Sharia. It’s mutual, Rudeus.”

It was kind of him to say that.

“Anyway, I’ll be seeing you… Oh, but first, I plan on stopping off at your house on the way home. Anything you want me to pass on?”

“Tell them I’ll be home really soon.”

“Got it,” Cliff said.

They left with that. Elinalise shot me a wink before she took off after Cliff. She’d helped out plenty too, but I hadn’t been able to say anything to her…but then, she was a neighbor. I could show my thanks through actions.

I really had received a lot help this time. Take Cliff: without him, the Superd might have been wiped out by the plague. Without Sandor and Dohga, I wouldn't be standing here. Atofe's timing had been utterly godly. First the Atofe Hand, then that perfectly timed attack on Ogre Island. You could say I owed my life to her as well.

Leaving her missing felt so ungrateful that, once things had settled down, I wanted to go out to sea and search for her.

The fight ended, and everyone went home. It was an empty feeling, like when a big event wraps up and everyone drifts away from it.

"All right." I'd finished clearing the trees during my musing. Before me spread a pristine stretch of land. After pulling the trees out by their roots, I'd piled them up neatly using earth magic. *A job well done, if I do say so myself.*

"Cool, so now Aisha will… Oh?" I turned around just as Ruijerd and Norn came walking up.

"There you are, Big Brother."

"Norn! Perfect timing. Could I get you to go and tell Aisha that I'm done clearing the trees?"

"Yes, of course," Norn replied. She turned at once and ran back toward the village.

Ruijerd drew closer. "Rudeus."

"Ruijerd."

"Sorry to put you through all this."

"Hey now," I shot back, "we promised not to talk like that, Mister."

"I made no such promise."

"No, I guess you didn't."

Ruijerd was working on the village's recovery. After that, he'd probably frequent our office, or else take a role negotiating with the Biheiril Kingdom. Norn followed him around everywhere. It looked like she planned on staying and helping him out, at least until the village was rebuilt.

"Please come and visit Sharia again once the village is finished."

"I will. I want to meet your children."

"They're super cute."

"All parents say that about their children," Ruijerd said, smiling. Then, he looked at me. We were practically the same height. "You really got stronger," he said. “I never thought you’d go as far as becoming one of the Seven Great Powers.”

“You could become one right now if you wanted. One punch from you, Ruijerd, and I’m down. One punch.”

“Don’t joke.”

“Still, it’s a fact that I didn’t get here through my own strength alone.”

“Perhaps that *is* your strength.”

“Maybe so.”

After watching me for a little while, Ruijerd smiled. He took the pendant that hung around his neck and held it out to me. It was Roxy’s pendant.

“It’s time for me to return this.”

“But this is…”

“It should be yours after all.” I’d given this pendant to Ruijerd when we parted for the first time. Roxy’s pendant, the one that seemed to have at some point become my mark. This very pendant had first inspired me to go out into this world.

“Thank you,” I said, and accepted it. When I gave it to him back then, it had been for a silly reason. When we’d parted I hadn’t needed him to give it back, I’d just wanted him to take it with him. Maybe I wanted a connection with him. Now, he had given it back. Because we were already like brothers. We wouldn’t be parting again for a long while.

“Ruijerd, you’ll have my back, right?”

“I will, though it might be beyond me.”

“We can each be what the other lacks.”

Ruijerd chuckled. “That we can.”

I smiled, and Ruijerd smiled back.

***

Norn brought the mercenaries along with her, and Ruijerd went back to the village. I left the construction sites and walked to the magic circles. I thought it was about time to head back to Sharia for a bit.

Then, with a start, I noticed another person coming the other way. It was Orsted wearing his black helmet as usual, and he wasn't alone. A black-haired boy trailed after him like a retainer. It reminded me of Atofe and Moore, or Perugius and Sylvaril. Like he'd been in this role for a hundred years. As much as I wanted to point out that I'd been here first, if it came to blows I'd lose. I kept my mouth shut.

Still, whenever I saw him, my teeth were on edge.

"Is something the matter?"

"No," I muttered.

"If I have done anything to offend you, please let me know. I'll be sure not to repeat it."

My wariness notwithstanding, Alec had grown submissive since that day. He was so earnest it made me wonder if it wasn't a cover for something else. Orsted demanded absolute obedience from me as well, though, so I knew it was genuine.

"I understand why you are wary, but after the battle the other day, I know my place. I understand now how inexperienced and insignificant I am. I hope to devote myself to study under Sir Orsted and you, Sir Rudeus, during which time I will seek to understand what it means to be a hero, and what it means to be North God. I have had my sword hand sealed—as you can see here—as both proof of my intentions and as a warning to myself." Alec raised his right arm to show me. It was severed cleanly at the wrist with a pattern carved into the stump. Orsted had cast that seal. Because of his immortal demon blood, Alec regenerated even when cut to pieces. He couldn't do it as speedily as Badigadi or Atofe, but it would inevitably happen after enough time. That was why, after cutting his right hand off, he'd asked Orsted to put a seal on it to stop it from growing back. It was proof of his loyalty.

I supplied the mana to the sealing magic circle, by the way.

"I'm hardly a threat with only my left hand, am I?" Alec continued.

"I think you could kill me with both arms missing, actually. With a headbutt or something."

"You needn't worry…but then, such modesty is to be praised, I suppose. I look forward to your continued advice and guidance."

"R-right… I really do think that, you know."

Orsted apparently trusted Alec, for he didn’t say anything about letting him stay close. I, meanwhile, had the feeling Alec was going to knife me in the back one day. Put plainly, he scared me. Even knowing that he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the box, scary’s still scary.

“So, uh, if you ever find yourself thinking, ‘Gee, I really want to be in the Seven Great Powers again,’ let me know? I’ll give it back any time.”

“Oh! About that, once I believe I’ve gained sufficient experience, I will ask you again.”

“You will *ask* me, right? Sneak attacks from behind are against the rules.”

“It may be that I challenge the Sword God and not you, Master Rudeus. Though rest assured that if I do challenge you, I shall do it with honor!”

“And no sharp edges, okay? I don’t want to fight to the death.”

“Understood!”

At present, the Seven Great Powers stood as follows:

Number One: Technique God Laplace.

Number Two: Dragon God Orsted.

Number Three: Fighting God Badigadi.

Number Four: Demon God Laplace.

Number Five: Death God Randolph.

Number Six: Sword God Gino Britz.

Number Seven: Quagmire Rudeus Greyrat.

I was the only one who looked ridiculously out of place, and I didn’t like it. It also really got me down thinking that I’d have to put up with idiots coming and attacking me to try and win a spot in the lineup.

My mark was the mark of the Migurds, which I’d rarely shown off up until now. Even after Ruijerd had returned Roxy’s pendant to me, I didn’t plan to start waving it around for anyone to see. No one should know who the Great Power actually was. My name wasn’t especially well-known either, so that should keep the challengers at bay.

Yeah, I’d stick with “Number Seven: Identity Unknown” for a while.

In case you’re interested, the Fighting God’s rank didn’t change in the last battle. Orsted said that it wouldn’t change unless the Fighting God Armor was totally annihilated.

I turned my gaze away from the fired-up and antsy Alec toward Orsted.

“Sir Orsted, ah…how are you feeling these days?” I asked. He had been listening in silence to our conversation.

“Not bad. Using a little mana doesn’t worsen things especially, anyway.”

Orsted had used mana in the last fight, and a lot of it. He said it had taken about half of his total. The fight had looked like an easy victory from where I was standing, and given he’d finished with full HP and only used half his MP, you couldn’t say it hadn’t been. Things looked different when he couldn’t recover any of that MP, though. He had used the mana he’d been saving for Laplace and the Man-God. We’d won, but the Man-God had satisfied one of his own victory conditions. Would it still count as a victory for us?

“Our allies are more numerous and our enemies fewer. I will have still less reason for using magic from here on out.”

Orsted didn’t seem bothered by it. Maybe he was trying to be optimistic.

“I sure hope so,” I said.

“Even if it does not turn out so, this time was different to all that came before. Thus, we need only continue along a different path to before. I am already resolved to that.”

Orsted was counting on me. Even if he used up the mana he was keeping for Laplace and the Man-God, it didn’t matter to him because I was fighting alongside him.

It seemed that to him, this had been a perfect victory. If he thought it was a win, it was. To be sure, there had been hardly any deaths—the Ogre God, several Superd, and several of Atofe’s personal guard. That was the extent of the casualties. Orsted’s mana was the only area where I felt like we’d been defeated.

“Oh, yes. What did you need me for?”

“I will be returning to Sharia.”

“Understood. I was thinking about going back myself… Oh, but I didn’t think the office had been rebuilt yet?”

“No matter. There will be somewhere I can sleep.”

The basement with the teleportation circles had been dug out to a bare minimum with earth magic, but with the restoration work continuing, it would need to be expanded. I also had to come up with a countermeasure to stop something like the Ogre God's destructive rampage from happening to it again. Admittedly, I was fresh out of good ideas on that score. It might be better to not have magic circles for any nations outside the principle ones. It was shocking that I'd never considered the possibility of an enemy using them to break in before.

"But first, I will go and see him one last time."

Oh. Him.

"I'll accompany you," I said.

***

That night, Orsted and I went to the Ravine of the Earthwyrm—to the bottom of the ravine. We went down the level path surrounded by blue mushrooms and lichen, to a little hole carved so it was concealed in the wall. It was about a meter tall; due to its slight curvature, it looked from the outside like it ran straight into a dead end. If you followed it ten meters or so down, it let out into a large cavern. In the cavern was a vast, glowing magic circle with a sword at its center. Maybe *vast* was overstating it. It was five meters in radius at most. Within it lay a reclining man.

"So, you have come."

It was Fighting God Badigadi. His body had been split into five pieces, each of which was sealed in a different location in the ravine. His main body was here. This barrier couldn't be broken unless the other four seals were broken first. It operated using the mana from Badigadi's own body and was amplified—and therefore, sustained—by the King Dragon Blade and the Fighting God Armor. It would go on operating almost in perpetuity. It was a custom-made barrier magic circle, a Perugius specialty. It was Divine-tier barrier magic, created to seal the Demon God. The sealed subject served as the medium and the magical implements as vectors, and the more powerful each were, the stronger the barrier became. This one used both the Fighting God Armor and the King Dragon Blade, meaning the barrier it generated was so powerful that even Orsted would be helpless to escape it. Using two Divine-tier pieces of equipment as one part of a barrier might have been overdoing it a tad. But that equipment was far more formidable in the hands of our enemies than used by us. Given that just the other day our enemies had used our teleportation circles against us, this wasn't out of proportion to the threat. As long as the seal on Badigadi remained intact, it effectively rendered the Magic Armor and King Dragon Blade sealed as well.

If anyone broke through this, we might as well just give up there and then. That was the reasoning.

Orsted had gone to Perugius to request the base for the barrier. He had bowed his head and asked Perugius for his aid, and Perugius had agreed. It wasn't just about the barrier: Perugius was Orsted's ally now. They were joined by a bond of fellowship. But Orsted would later have to kill Perugius. He had chosen the path of betrayal.

I was indebted to Perugius and Orsted both, so my personal feelings about it were complicated. I knew that Orsted hadn't wanted to do it this way. That he had chosen it anyway meant that it wasn't for me to say anything about it. If only, I thought, there was a way to get to the Man-God without using the Dragon Tribe's sacred treasures, but I knew it wasn't a problem you could solve with wishes and a little time in a library.

Ah, well. Maybe it wasn't something I ought to be thinking about. I had the guy in front of me to worry about right now.

"I am terribly sorry, Your Majesty, but as you're a disciple of the Man-God, we had no choice."

"I am cramped," Badigadi said pompously as he lay there like a reclining Buddha. "I should like a little more freedom of movement."

I had my own relationship with jail cells, but I think even I would have found the sealed barrier cramped. Having said that, I hated the idea of killing him. Kishirika had also asked us not to.

"I really am sorry, but this is as much as I can do."

"Humph. Then so it must be!" Badigadi said, adding a little *fwahaha* of laughter.

He had two arms, and his body was smaller than it had been before. That was the result of the seal.

"Now! What brings you here, pray tell? I assume you have not come to drink and make merry while basking in my sultry allure?"

"Sir Orsted has something to speak with you about," I said, then stepped aside for Orsted.

“Demon King Badigadi,” he intoned.

“Good evening to you, Master Dragon God. And how may I be of assistance?”

“Leave the Man-God and submit to me.”

For a moment, Badigadi gaped at him. But then, he burst out in raucous laughter. “Fwahahahahahaha!” It echoed around the cavern.

“The pariah of the dragon tribe dares command me, an immortal demon, to bow down to him?”

“There was a time when we were enemies, but you are a friend of Rudeus’s. Alex, Alexander, and Atofe have all allied themselves with me. There is surely room for you to consider it.”

“There is not!” Badigadi said defiantly.

“But why, Great-Uncle?” Alec, who had been standing near the entrance to the cavern, stepped forward. “You’re defeated, are you not? In accordance with the laws of the immortal demons—”

“Alec, do not misunderstand. That is not a rule across all of immortal demonkind. It is an Atofe rule.”

““Have you pledged your loyalty to the Man-God then, Great-Uncle?”

“I have not.” Badigadi sat up and shook his head. Then he folded his only pair of arms and crossed his legs. “I was not one for fighting, originally. What I liked was to travel, to drink and be merry, seducing passing women, bedding them, on occasion. Taking a beating from a jilted fiancé, making friends and drinking, laughing, and singing, then looking around at the worn-out faces, sleeping and satisfied. The Man-God came to me, head bowed, and asked me to fight, and so I did. That is all it was. ‘I want you to kill Dragon God Orsted and Rudeus Greyrat, no matter what,’ he said. ‘Who do you have to thank that you and Kishirika are alive in the same era?’ he said. And he asked me to remember four thousand two hundred years back and repay the debt I owed him. As a result, I agreed to help him this one time.” He paused for a moment. “That one time has passed. Now, I ally myself to no one! If my choice is to fight or to be sealed in this place, then I choose to remain sealed.”

That made me think that maybe we could let him go. Though he *was* still a disciple of the Man-God, so we couldn’t just blindly let him loose after nothing more than a bout of smooth talk.

"Either way," Badigadi went on, grinning at me as I pondered, "You'll release me when your fight against the Man-God concludes, will you not?"

"Yes," Orsted said. I looked at him, and that's when I realized.

It wouldn't happen during my lifetime, but if Orsted won his battle with the Man-God, there'd be no need to keep Badigadi chained up any longer.

"It will be a hundred years hence."

"Not so soon then. I shall be patient," Badigadi said, then lay back down. With a nod, Orsted turned to leave. It looked like the discussion was over. That was quick.

"Your Majesty, I…I know this might not be the best circumstances to say it, but I wanted to thank you for everything at the Magic University."

"Listen well, Rudeus. This may be the last time we meet, so I shall say it now: congratulations."

"Congra…tulations?"

"You were victorious, thus, I congratulate you."

"I'm not sure if I was, though…"

That was exactly what I was worried about. In the end, Orsted had used his mana. I'd slipped up at the very last moment.

But Badigadi didn't mention that.

"You have given the Man-God a taste of defeat."

"I gave him…what?"

"You have made him think that, no matter what he might try, he cannot kill you. He has lost all will to try. Indeed, it is hard to describe how he looked when I saw him last, except that he looked the very image of defeat. What else to call the one who fought him but victorious?"

"Is that really true?" I asked.

"You need only take off that bracelet and pay him a visit yourself to verify it." He pointed at me, and my hand unconsciously went to cover the bracelet.

"I…don't think I will, thanks."

"No? Well. As you like it!"

I wasn't falling for that one. I never wanted to see the Man-God again, though he had seemed pretty desperate when I'd last seen him at the bottom of the ravine. Maybe he really had taken this last battle as a heavy defeat. I still didn't trust Badigadi when he said the Man-God had lost the will to try any more, though.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, from me, at least."

"Then keep yourself well, Rudeus."

I turned and followed after Orsted. As I did so, Alec ran forward, looking anguished.

"Great-Uncle…I…"

"Listen well, young Alexander. If you seek to be a hero, find your true foe. That was something your father never did. You will surpass him when you strike down that foe."

"Thank you," Alec replied, and he, too, turned to leave.

This would probably be my final farewell to Badigadi in this life. Nothing stopped me from dropping by once a year or so, but talking to him I might weaken and end up breaking the seal. Better not to come at all. I hadn't told any of the others from the Magic University that Badigadi was sealed here either. Only five people knew: me, Orsted, Ruijerd, Alec, and Perugius. We'd already - decided that Ruijerd would watch from the village to make sure no one visited the ravine. Not many could make it to the bottom of the ravine or make it back up again. And a hundred years shouldn't be long enough for the seal to spontaneously fail.

And then—

"Rudeus, the entrance."

"Understood."

I would fill in the narrow entrance. Anyone who came after would have to dig it out if they wanted to find it again. This was goodbye.

At the end, ever so faintly, I thought I heard Badigadi's voice.

"May it be that your curse is lifted, young Dragon God."

***

Early the next morning, before the sun rose, I returned to Sharia. Between the new office currently under construction and rubble left from the old, there was a makeshift accommodation where Zanoba—our acting director of construction—and the others were sleeping all packed together. Zanoba! He'd been a big help, too. I hoped we could go on being the sort of friends who always had each other's backs.

"Goodbye, Rudeus," he ushered me onward. "Until next time."

The same went for Orsted. On the outskirts of the town, we parted ways. I walked on through the streets in the morning mist. I was carrying presents from the Biheiril Kingdom—largely soy sauce. So long as I had this soy sauce, I'd never be at a loss for what to eat again. Soy sauce goes with everything.

Well, everything might be an overstatement.

I looked around. Sharia was just as I remembered it. The people were the same—farmers heading off to their fields, adventurers training in inn courtyards, and a man in a robe who might have been a professor at the university. Snowdrifts lined the road I walked on as I passed each traveler, heading toward home. I went through the central square to the residential district. Seeing it made me feel somehow nostalgic. It was a street I walked down practically every day, and yet seeing it felt like I was coming home for the first time in my life.

From the street, I turned down a back alley. This alley, too narrow for carts, provided a tiny shortcut that I'd used often. Coming out of the alley, I could see my house. Byt was coiled tightly around the gatepost and opened the gate for me as I drew closer. I passed the garden and the slightly neglected garden. Dillo the armadillo spotted me and came to rub himself against my legs. I crouched down to rub his head, at which he rolled over to show me his belly. As I rubbed his tummy, he purred happily. He was a cute little guy.

Then, I heard a loud noise from the entrance to the house.

"Dada!" A little girl with hair the same color as mine came running out. It was Lucie. She came sprinting over like she was going to tackle me around the knees, so I crouched down to meet her. With a sizable thud, a ball of softness and warmth threw itself into my arms. This was unusual—she was always hiding behind Sylphie.

"I'm home, Lucie."

"Welcome back," she said eventually.

"Have you been a good girl?"

"Yes! I've been looking after Lara and Arus and Sieg!"

"Have you really? You're a real big sister now, aren't you?" I said. Lucie's arms squeezed even tighter around me, spurring me to pick her up. I walked up to the house with her in my arms. From inside came a smell that somehow put me at ease—the familiar smell that hung around our house. Since we'd first bought this house, the number of inhabitants had increased. As we'd lived in it, it had changed, but I was so used to it that I didn't notice how it smelled. But now, coming back after a long time away, and from a brush with death, no less, I felt all the tension drain out of me. My heart was at ease. It was a smell that let me know I was home.

"Hello, Lilia. Hello, Mother." As I stood filling my lungs with the smell of home, I saw Lilia and Zenith in front of the stairs.

Lilia bowed deeply when she saw me. "Welcome home, Master."

"Thank you for looking after the house while I was gone, Lilia."

"Not at all, Master. I'm so glad to see you safely home."

"It will be a little longer before Norn and Aisha come back."

"Thank you for letting me know. Oh, but I am glad you're safe… When the Dragon God's residence on the outskirts of the city was attacked, I was beside myself with worry. I am so glad, so very glad…" Lilia made normal conversation for a while, but it wasn't long before she put her hand to her mouth as though she couldn't hold it back any longer. Her shoulders shook. She started weeping.

"I'm sorry I made you worry…"

I'd had no means of contacting her, so there was nothing I could have done. It did make sense that, after the company I was working for was crushed by a rival company, she would have been beside herself. And in truth, things could easily have turned out as she'd feared. And not only for me; any of the others might have failed to come back from that fight. I had done everything I could to ensure everyone did come home, but it was a miracle that none of the people I cared most about had died.

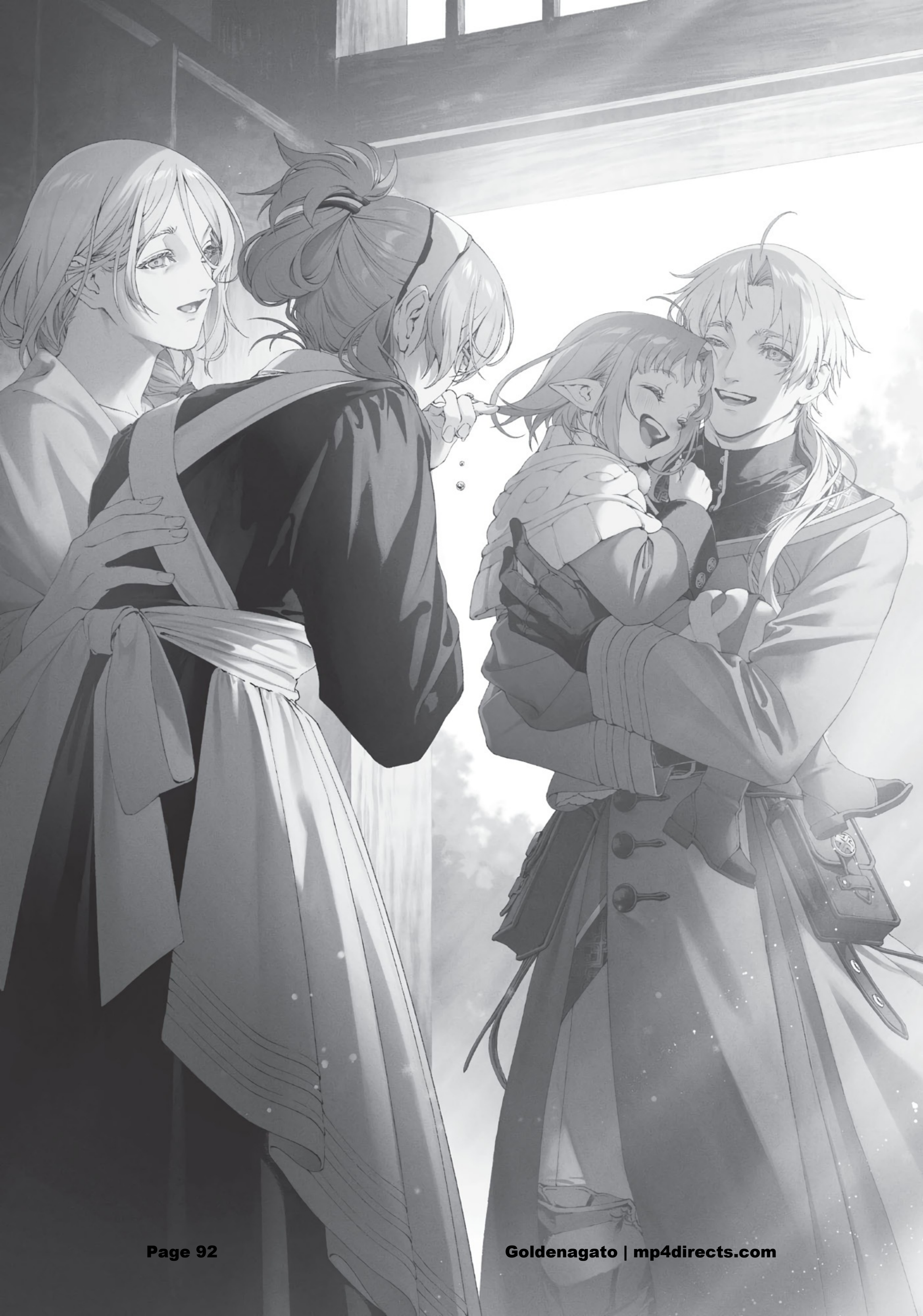
On the other hand, I couldn't honestly say that I could stop anything like this from happening again.

“There shouldn’t be another big battle like this one for a while, so please, don’t worry anymore.”

“That’s good,” Lilia said. “I’m so very sorry you had to see me go to pieces like this.”

I realized that Zenith was rubbing Lilia’s back. Had I made Zenith worry too? She seemed to have lost her negative emotions, but I thought she’d at least worry about me. She was that sort of person.

Anyway.



"I'm home," I said. I took a step into the house. It finally felt real that my long battle with Geese was over.

***

It was the day after the end of the battle had really sunk in, and I couldn't relax. The battle with Geese was over, which was to say, the contract I'd made with myself was over, too.

Look. You know what that meant.

The battle had gone on for so long that this way of life had started to feel natural to me, but early that morning, my little guy had started reasserting himself. Talk about an insistent reminder.

My name was Rudeus Greyrat, son of Paul Greyrat, which meant treachery from below my belt was part of my DNA. I'd put Rudeus Jr. through a long period of hardship and endurance. That was what had enabled me to do my best. As the first Rudeus, it was my duty to see he was repaid. He'd fulfilled his side of the contract.

Before the sun had risen, I got out of bed, went downstairs, and headed for the front door. There, I found Leo and Eris.

"Rudeus! You're up early today."

"Morning, Eris. Where *is* everyone?"

"All safe."

"Not that. I mean what are they doing?"

Eris thought for a moment. "Lilia and Sylphie are making breakfast, and Roxy and the children and your mother are still asleep. I just finished training, so I was about to go for a run."

"Right," I said softly, taking Eris's hand. She squeezed my fingers. Maybe because she'd just been training, but her hand was warm. I noticed her face was also a little flushed.

"Wh-what?" she said.

"Eris, let's take today off."

"R-right! Okay!" The way she said "okay" sounded like she'd guessed exactly what I had in mind. Maybe it showed on my face.

She was right on the money.

"Sorry, Leo, but no walk for now."

"Ruff." Leo looked a bit disappointed, but he gave my hand a little lick, then went back into the house.

I followed him inside, still holding Eris's hand, and headed for the kitchen. Lilia and Sylphie stood beside each other cooking.

"Sylphie," I said.

"Oh, good morning, Rudy. You're up early."

"Good morning, Master." Both women smiled at me like they always did. I turned to Sylphie then, with a smile so natural I surprised myself, said, "Sylphie, let's take today off."

"What? I don't mind, but when you say 'day off'…" She looked at me quizzically. But Lilia seemed to catch on right away.

"Very well. I'll finish up breakfast, Miss Sylphie."

"Oh…" Sylphie said, her face going red. "*That's* what you mean." She smiled shyly, then took the hand Eris wasn't holding. Maybe it was because she'd wet her hands while cooking, but her fingers were a little cold.

"When you said it, Rudy, the look on your face was so normal that I didn't realize. Did you see it straight away, Eris?"

"I just sort of knew!"

As the other two chatted, I turned to Lilia. "Lilia, please watch the children until lunchtime. Oh, and let's all go out to eat tonight."

"Very well, Master." She smiled like she'd seen right through my plans, though she also seemed a little embarrassed.

Well, it was a bit late for that.

Holding hands with Sylphie and Eris, we headed for the children's bedroom. I quietly opened the door and peeked inside. The four kids were sound asleep. Lucie, Lara, Arus, and Sieg. Leo was curled up in a corner of the room, watching over them.

In the battle, I'd worried so much about my family. Despite my fears, all was peaceful here. Unless some battle had taken place at the house, unbeknownst to me, and Leo had protected them…

Anyway, after checking that the children were all well, I softly shut the door again. Then, we went upstairs to Roxy's room. In the interests of good manners, I knocked.

There was a pause for a few seconds, then, "Yes?"

I opened the door and saw Roxy, her eyes bleary with sleep. Her hair was rumpled and there were drool marks around her mouth. Her nightgown hung open at the front, so that I could almost see inside. Very sexy.

"Oh…Rudy. Good morning. It's so early, did something…?"

"Good morning, Roxy. I thought we'd take a day off. What do you think?"

Roxy stared blankly at me, then she seemed to work out what "day off" meant. Toying with her sleep-tousled bangs, her cheeks turning pink, she said, "Well, I don't mind, but…" I followed her gaze to one of the two women holding my hands. "Did Eris agree to this?"

I looked at Eris. Her face was red, and she looked a bit shell shocked.

"I was just about to ask her." Turning to face Eris properly, I said, "Eris, I'd like to go back to my bedroom with the four of us. Is that okay with you?"

Eris seemed to understand what I meant. Her face went even redder, and she pursed her lips. She probably would have struck her favorite pose if she'd had both hands free.

"Well, I suppose, if you really want to…"

Sorry, Eris. I just wanted to treat myself a little today. And bid farewell to Rudeus the Celibate.

"Thank you," I said. I didn't just say it because Eris had given her permission. I was thanking all three of them for everything they'd done to support me up to this moment. I was so thankful I hadn't lost any of them.

Geese and Badigadi had both said it was over now. That the Man-God wouldn't bother me anymore. I didn't believe a word of it: the Man-God would be my enemy for as long as I lived. But today, I'd relax and do absolutely nothing. Not a thing. Rest. Get my strength back for tomorrow, and spend a day in peace. To remind myself that I could still laugh, and—

Nah, I'm messing with you. I was gonna get laid. From today on, I was Rudeus the Free. Felt good.

With that, we headed for the bedroom.

FINAL CHAPTER
Complete Edition

Story 1:
The Final Dream

THE PLACE I FOUND myself was all white. The same white place as always. I could count the number of times I'd been here since being reincarnated in this world on my fingers, but every time, without fail, it was still the same white, empty place I keep coming back to.

When I came here, I always looked as I had in my past life, with a potbelly and rolls of flab. My body felt heavy and powerless. Strangely enough, it didn't disgust me anymore. I didn't feel frustration welling up in the depths of my chest. Being like this didn't seem so bad. Maybe that was because I hadn't been back here for such a long time.

Unless…

"Wait, what?"

That was weird. Sure, it had been a long time, but I didn't remember taking my bracelet off. I never took it off.

Why was I here?

Hold on. What was I even doing before I came here? I couldn't remember what I'd been doing before I fell asleep. I think it was probably, you know, something along the lines of baby-making…No scratch that, I hadn't done anything like that for a long time. I'd been neglecting it for around ten years now.

My memory was hazy, for some reason.

"Hey."

Dazed as my memory was, my vision was sharp. As usual, *he* was here in this white place. That pixelated blob. The Man-God.

But what was this? He looked strange. His body was in pieces, with each of his four limbs held in place by something that looked like a magic circle and bound by some sort of translucent chain.

He looked like the final boss in an RPG. It was like, I dunno, unless you hit him in the right leg, he'd use a restoration spell to return to full health. A giant pain in the ass.

What happened to you? Cosplaying Exodia the Forbidden One or something?

“They got me.”

Who?

“You’re asking me that?”

I don’t see anyone else asking. What, is there someone here other than me?

“…Take a look over there.”

I turned around and saw a crowd of people. They were standing with their backs to me. No one there I knew. Unfamiliar men and unfamiliar women, demons, humans.

There were about eight of them. One of them, I knew. It was Orsted. He was the same as ever, but a few things had changed. He didn’t have his black helmet, and there was a sizable scar on his face that made him look more fearsome than ever. Yet the people around him were all smiling at him. Orsted’s face was as terrifying as it’d ever been, but there was a slight softness to his expression. I couldn’t make out what they were talking about, but I could see the trust between them.

The one speaking…was a boy. He looked seventeen or eighteen years old, with short hair and the kind of good looks that made me think he’d be good at sports. A normie sort of face, and Asian, going off his features. He had a nice smile. I guess Orsted’s curse didn’t affect him.

As I was watching the boy, a woman in the group stood up. Sitting, she’d been hidden by the others. Really, she was more a girl than a woman. She had blue hair and at her side was a giant white wolf.

Ah, I’d seen her somewhere before. She looked like Roxy, but not Roxy. She was definitely a Migurd, but I’d never mistake someone else for Roxy. So…who was she?

Could…could she be *Lara*?

Just then, the girl turned and waved at me. It couldn’t be at me. She had to be waving at the Man-God.

A man near her said something to her, probably asking what she was doing. She said something in reply, and he looked my way in surprise. He looked Asian, too. There weren’t many people in this world with that sort of face. He could have been Japanese. I’d have put him in his twenties, no older than thirty. He turned to me and bowed—a Japanese gesture. Maybe he was Japanese?

Then, the whole group turned my way. I saw faces both young and old. What I’d first thought was eight people was actually a much larger group, but they were hazy, making them hard to see. The only face I recognized was Orsted’s, but…oh, but was that Eris? A sword fighter with braided red hair was looking this way. No, she didn’t quite look how I remembered Eris, though…

They all looked our way and made gestures of gratitude. Were they thanking the Man-God? Probably not, their manner wasn’t quite right for that. Who, then?

As I watched, wondering, they all stepped onto a magic circle drawn by Lara and disappeared somewhere. Just like that, they were all gone. The magic circle remained, glowing pale blue, but after a while, the glow faded, and the magic circle itself disappeared. Everything was gone.

“That lot ganged up on me and went to town. Then they cut me up like this and sealed me here. Said if I died, the last remaining human world might be destroyed.”

Would it be destroyed?

“How should I know? It’s not like I’ve died before.”

Right, fair point. No one knows what happens when they die.

“So, are you happy now?”

With what?

“This is the ending you wanted. Me, living here alone with all my powers sealed away. I’m living only to keep the world in existence. I can’t see it anymore. I can’t speak to anyone. I’ll just go on staring into this empty, white void.”

I dunno. It’s hard to say if that makes me happy or not. My goal was never to do anything to you. I just wanted a happy life with Sylphie, Roxy, and Eris. Go to work, earn a living, come home to eat dinner with my family, do some sweet, sweet baby-making at night. A normal…no, a happy life like that.

A normal life—the happiest life I could possibly imagine.

“Your happiness is my misery.”

Yeah? All right, I'm satisfied then. I mean, you look about as miserable as it's possible to be right now, so I must be happy.

"You…you can't seriously… You disgust me!"

I couldn't read the Man-God's expression, but his voice wasn't hateful. It was simply full of sadness. He sounded like he might cry.

"I hate you."

Okay. Well, you—

I lost consciousness.

***

When I awoke, I was in bed. It was a truly massive bed, big enough that three people could have slept comfortably in it, and it was soft. My back was a little damp, which I didn't love, but it was pleasant otherwise. There was no one sleeping beside me. I could move my eyes and my neck, but not so much my body. It was like the blanket was too heavy. I moved just my eyes to look away from the bed and saw a girl with red hair sitting there. She had single-fold eyelids and a determined line to her chin—the spitting image of Eris, although she wore her hair in an unassuming braid and was far smaller. Both in terms of height and cup size. I expected that much: she looked about five years old.

When her eyes met mine, she dropped what she was holding and leapt to her feet. The chair fell over with a crash and she looked like she might fall with it. Right away, I propped her up. How did I prop her up when my body wouldn't move? I couldn't tell you myself. She just put her hands out and caught herself in mid-air, then righted herself. No sooner had she planted her feet on the ground once more than she left the room.

"Mama! Mama! Great-Grandpa's awake!" Listening to the patter of running feet, I looked at the item she'd been holding. It was a bracelet engraved with the Dragon God's emblem. I didn't remember taking it off, but—ah, yes, I suppose she must have taken it off while I was asleep. I reached for the bracelet, my arms trembling. It was so heavy. No, scratch that. It wasn't heavy. I was weak. My arm had grown so thin that I couldn't even pick up a bracelet.

Just then, my eyes found the mirror in a corner of the room, and I saw an old man slumped in bed who looked like he might die at any moment. He had a white beard, white hair, and deep wrinkles. The shadow of death was visible in every line of his face.

Ahh, I remember now. I turn seventy-four this year.

There was something odd about thinking that. Everything else, I couldn't really remember. It was like a fog hung over my memories. Had there been a room like this in my house…?

"Rudy?!" A white-haired woman who looked about forty came bursting into the room. A proper middle-aged lady. When our eyes met, she came straight to my side and gripped my hand that lay on top of the blankets.

"Sylphie…?"

"Yes… That's right, Rudy. It's Sylphiette," she told me gently. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah… Yeah, I know you. What…happened to me?"

"Nothing happened. It's just, you were asleep for a long time."

So I was just asleep. Right. I did feel sleepy.

"But why can't I move?"

"Yes, well… Yes…" Sylphie didn't answer me. She just stroked my hand sympathetically. Like she was humoring a forgetful old man…

Wait, you don't mean… Am I senile? Is that why I have no memories? What?

Seventy-four shouldn't be old enough for that…but was I actually seventy-four? Maybe I'd aged a lot more. Maybe I'd been senile for much longer.

Just how long had I been in this bed for, anyway?

"I'm scared…" I said.

"You're okay. I'm here with you." Sylphie squeezed my hand harder. Just that was enough to relieve some of my fear. But not all of it.

In the next instant a torrent of people poured into the room. I saw a redheaded child, a blue-haired child, a blonde child. Some of them were young, some middle-aged, some elderly, and they all came to stand around my bed. They looked like people I knew.

"Look, Rudy. Everyone's here to see you."

"Yeah…"

For some reason, I couldn't remember a single one of their names. Ah, one of them I knew. The one who came in slowly behind everyone else, then shut the door behind her. It was a small girl with blue hair. She wore it in braids, just as she always had.

"Roxy."

"Rudy." When I said her name, she looked for a moment like she might cry. But she came straight to stand beside Sylphie, then gently stroked my head.

"Rudy."

"Thank you, Roxy…" Then, the word slipping out of my mouth, I said, "Master."

Tears spilled from Roxy's eyes. She hastily wiped them away and tried to look cheerful, but her mouth only twisted, unable to form a full smile.

A question struck me.

"What about Eris? Isn't she here?"

Usually, she'd have been rushing in first, but I saw no sign of her.

"Oh, Rudy. Eris already…she went on ahead."

"Went on where?"

"She's waiting for you, Rudy."

Oh, now I see. I see.

"Was I there for her?"

"Yes, don't worry. You cried for three days straight, but you got through it."

That's right. It was hazy, but the memory was coming back to me.

Eris had kept on training hard past seventy. But then one day, after going for a run and doing her sword drills, she'd come home, fallen into bed, and that was it. She never got up again. By the time I realized, she was already dead. I'd cried because I thought perhaps if I'd noticed sooner and used healing magic on her, maybe I could have made her better.

I'd even forgotten *that*. That meant I couldn't have long either…

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “You’re all here for me, but I don’t know who’s who.”

“I know, don’t worry. Let’s see… From over there, we have our grandchildren—that’s Lucie’s son, Roland, see? And beside him—” Sylphie went through pointing at each of them and telling me their names. They were almost all my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Where were my kids? Ah, that’s right, they’d all left the nest and moved to live far away.

“And over there, with the red hair, the girl who looks just like Eris. That’s Arus’s granddaughter—your great-granddaughter—Feris.”

“Ah, the girl who woke me up.”

The red-haired girl looked a little embarrassed. Probably nervous that she’d get a scolding for trying to pinch my bracelet. I had the feeling I’d seen here somewhere before.

Right. She’d been in my dream about the Man-God. I was pretty sure she’d been in that group of people. Yeah, that was it. It had been her, for sure. She’d been a good deal older than she was now, but I knew it was her.

“Come here,” I said, and she obeyed, tears prickling her eyes.

“Did you take this off my arm?” I pointed at the bracelet. Tears began to pour down her cheeks. I guess now that she knew getting in trouble was inevitable, she was trying to cry her way out of it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just so pretty.”

“Is it now? Well, then, you keep it.”

She gaped at me. “Really?”

“In return, you’re not to take people’s things without asking ever again.”

“I promise.”

“Good girl.” I reached out slowly and patted her head. She might get scolded later, but ah, well. It wouldn’t be my fault if she turned out spoiled.

“They all look healthy.”

“Yeah, they are.”

That put me at ease. Everyone had to be doing well if I had *this* many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

“Glad to hear it. All that work was worth it…”

As my strength faded, my hand slid from Feris's head. There was murmuring around me.

Relax. I'm not going to snuff it quite yet. I plan on staying a bedridden old man for a while yet.

Someone came into the room. He was tall, with silver hair and a scowl on his face.

"Rudeus," he said.

"Sir Orsted." The moment he appeared, the mood of the room changed. Was it tension? Fear? But no, it was more relaxed. It was reassurance, and trust.

"You don't need to wear the helmet?"

"No. Your grandchildren cry when I put it on." Laughter broke out around him, along with calls of "I won't cry anymore," and "Man, I really bawled back then."

"People don't fear your face anymore?"

"No, the curse remains. Only your children and grandchildren are unaffected."

Orsted's expression was much softer than it had been when I'd first met him. He was still scowling, but I suppose you could say he was relaxed.

"Actually, Sir Orsted, that reminds me," I said.

"What is it?"

"Just before, when Feris took the bracelet from me, I dreamed of the Man-God."

There was a pause. "Are you a disciple now?"

"Well, I dunno about that. It might've just been an ordinary dream…" I said. "If I had become a disciple, what would you do? Would you kill me like you did all the others?"

"Naturally. I do not suffer traitors," Orsted said, dead serious. Despite that, I immediately picked up that he was joking. Everyone around him laughed, for one thing, and I didn't feel any hostility coming off him. It felt like poor taste to say that sort of thing in front of a bedridden old man on death's door…but maybe it was one of those surefire lines that always got a laugh.

"In the dream, you'd defeated the Man-God. He was bound with magic."

“A good dream, then.”

“Yeah, really good.”

Could that dream have shown future events? It felt real, but then, dreams always did.

“I hope you’ll do your best to make it come true,” I said. Orsted gave a solemn nod.

As you’d expect, after fifty years of knowing him, I could read his expressions incredibly accurately.

“You lived well. May you rest in peace.”

“Ha ha… It’s a bit early for resting.”

I wanted to stay awake a bit longer. I felt okay. While I couldn’t really move, the sunlight on me was warm and pleasant.

“I’ll stay a little longer. Just a little longer…”

It wasn’t like there was anything I really wanted to do. I just wanted to look at all the faces around me for a little longer. That was all. I suppose you could say I was a little sad to be leaving them. I just wanted another hour or two with them—even another ten minutes would be enough.

I didn’t have anything I needed to say. I didn’t have any lingering regrets. Right now just felt nice in a small way. That was all.

“Just a little…”

My eyelids began to close, drooping down little by little. The last thing I saw was the girl who looked just like Eris, and Sylphie and Roxy’s faces.

Then my eyes closed.

And just like that, I was gone.

Story 2:
Thirty-Four Years Old

I WOKE UP. I had the feeling I'd had a strange dream. Like, a happy dream. Sylphie and Roxy were there. Eris wasn't, but there was a child who looked just like her. The dream was hazy, but I remembered it perfectly. In the dream, I died. Somehow, I knew that I'd never wake up again after that dream. But I didn't feel bad. It was actually my second time dying, and it was far better than the first.

"Huh?" I realized a girl was holding my hand and standing stock-still. She had blue hair tied back in a single ponytail. She held my hand in her right and a bracelet in her left, and had a look on her face like a deer in headlights.

"…I'm sorry," she said suddenly. She must have been taught to apologize when she did something wrong.

"Did you want it?"

"…No. My big sister said there was a super amazing crest hidden under your bracelet, Dad."

"Did she now?"

There was no hidden crest. I wasn't the chosen one, after all.

But looking past the girl holding the bracelet, I saw a brush resting on the bedside table. That definitely hadn't been there before I fell asleep.

"Were you going to draw it?"

"…I'm sorry."

She was driven enough to try and turn a lie into reality. Should I praise her, or scold her? Okay, no, this was a scolding situation. *It's a father's responsibility to educate his daughter, so… Yeah.*

"Lara, you mustn't tell lies. Go say sorry to your sister."

"Okay…"

I patted her on the head, and she left the room, dejected. After she left, I caught sight of a big ball of white fur. Leo must have been keeping watch outside the door. I was about to put the bracelet back on, but then the brush caught my eye. I used it to paint the Migurd crest on my arm, then got out of bed.

“Oof, that’s a nasty headache… I drank too much.”

I cradled my head in my hands. Maybe it was the party the previous night, or maybe it was the dream I’d just had, but it hurt like hell.

***

Ten years had passed since the battle in the Biheiril Kingdom. This year, I would be thirty-four. These ten years had been peaceful thanks to the absence of the Man-God. After that battle, it really had just stopped. I hadn’t seen so much of a pixel of him for a few years now. Not that I had let my guard down! While constantly on the lookout for suspicious attacks, I went on preparing to confront Laplace, just as I had before. Things went much more smoothly without the Man-God sticking his nose in.

In the first five years, I finished calling in on all the nations of the world. Some of them were nonstarters, but by and large, they all pledged to work with us to prepare for the coming war with Laplace.

Now, I was working on research and teaching unvoiced magic at the Magic University in the Asuran Kingdom while also leading the militaries of the world to develop counter-strategies to Laplace’s most likely moves.

For that work, I put away the name Rudeus and started to work under the name “Silent Sevenstar.” The theory Nanahoshi had once put forward might be accurate or it might not be, but she’d said, “I want you to make my name a clue, just in case a friend from our old world ever comes here.” I took her words to heart and spread her name around. I was also giving her quite a reputation, but so what? No harm, no foul. For the time being, awareness was the priority, and a person from another world would surely understand the meaning behind what I’d tried to do in her name.

Lately, I’d been researching mana recovery to improve Orsted’s mana recovery rate. I’d managed to create a potion that restored mana, but for some reason it didn’t work on Orsted. Possibly human mana and dragon mana was different? It might have been something else. I was going to press on with the research a little longer, but I couldn’t shake the feeling I was going down a dead end. The potion had been a smash hit in its own way, so it hadn’t been entirely for nothing. There were lots of other things I still needed to do, besides. I couldn't rest yet.

My children had grown up. Lucie was seventeen. Lara was fifteen, and Arus was thirteen. Sieg was…eleven, I think? They were all thriving. We'd also had two more children: Lily Greyrat, with Roxy, and Christina Greyrat, with Eris. Both girls. With six children, we were a big family. When Lucie turned seven we had a family meeting to roughly decide our education policy for her: things like sending her to the magic university from the age of seven, then scheduling her coming-of-age ceremony for after graduation, and then having her attend the national university in Asura for three years. My personal philosophy was that it was better not to drive your children too hard. Still, I thought we ought to decide where they'd be educated and provide some guideposts for the path they ought to take.

It was Ariel's express wish that I send my children to the Asuran National University. I owed her a massive debt. If she'd said, "Give one to me as a husband so that we can be joined as blood relatives!" I would have refused—duh—but a little thing like asking me to send my kids to her university? I could hardly refuse that. I wanted to gradually pay down my debt to her.

Ariel, by the by, had a baby of her own after the Biheiril Kingdom Battle. She hadn't married the father so as not to give him too much power. Apparently, she kept a sizable harem of men. Ariel had five children now, but it wasn't clear who had fathered four of them…or so Luke had told me, pale-faced and cradling his head in his hands. At the time, I'd wondered how he'd worked out who one of them was. Now that I think of it, it's possible the one he knew was Luke himself.

Ariel was reportedly scheming to pair up one of my children with one of those five. I didn't much like the idea of my children being used as political pawns, but once they were of age, if they were both okay with the match, I'd permit it.

My children were still young, but I knew that with each passing year, they'd grow up. Lucie in particular was already a proper adult with a mind of her own. Not that the grown-ups around her had matured all that much; I honestly couldn't tell if I'd changed. Whenever I thought I'd improved some bad trait, another one would crop up. Sometimes the bad traits I'd fixed relapsed, too. It felt like I was just making the same mistakes over and over as the years ticked away. The only real visible sign of my growth was how my face aged with the passing years. I'd even gotten a few laugh lines. Sylphie told me, "I like that about you as well," but it made me feel sort of guilty when she still looked young. You could tell she was aging, but the changes were slight considering we were the same age. That meant she'd be thirty-four this year, but she still looked around twenty. Her skin glowed with youth and even though she'd had two children, her butt was still tight, and she felt as good to hold as ever.

The only thing was, on the inside, she'd totally turned into…uh, a mom, so she'd started to nag me a lot. Roxy never changed. She looked the same and acted pretty much the same too. She'd get mad if I told her that, but I meant it as praise. She was still my master, as always, so whenever I did something wrong she corrected me. Her clumsiness never lessened over the years, but she always picked herself up again. Failure is a wonderful teacher, as they say.

Going by looks, Eris had changed the most. Like me, she looked her age. Only, maybe because she didn't skip a day of training, she looked way younger than me. She still had the skin of a woman in her late twenties. Having a second child seemed to have mellowed her out a bit, but she still pounced on me from time to time. She'd hardly changed at all on the inside—the opposite of Sylphie—but I did feel like she'd gotten less violent since she'd started teaching sword fighting to the kids. She'd learned to grin and bear it when her temper flared. She still punched me if I touched her butt or her breasts without permission, but that was only natural.

Lilia and Zenith looked older. They were both still healthy, but Lilia, maybe because her leg had always given her trouble, had started getting back pain and stiff shoulders. Healing magic would make it go away, but give it three months, and it would come back. A perfect cure seemed like it would be challenging to develop.

Everyone else was aging well alongside us. Zanoba and Cliff were old dudes now, both busy with their jobs and their families. They were there for one another when they got into binds.

Norn and Aisha had both gotten married and moved out. Their partners were both a little…complicated, as people, but then, I'd had a good talk with both of them and been convinced they were worthy, so it wasn't my place to comment on it now.

I was really turning thirty-four years old. It was an age that had some significance for me.

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Around midday on that day, I went out. On the outskirts of town, on top of a small hill, there stood rows of rounded stones. It was a graveyard.

"Hello. I really appreciate all this." At the entrance, I said a word of thanks to the grave keeper, as I always did. Over the past ten years, the number of graves here had increased. People come into the world and leave it, but gravestones don't thin out much. In other graveyards, sometimes gravestones can be torn down when a whole family dies or something, but this graveyard was for nobles. Unless the line ended, the gravestones would remain—especially since the Ranoa Kingdom and the Magic City of Sharia were growing ever more powerful. As their might swelled, so did the number of nobles, and the number of gravestones soared with them.

I stopped in front of one grave.

On the rounded stone was written *Paul Greyrat*. It was much more worn than it had been when it was first built. Using the gear I'd brought, I tidied the area around the grave and polished the stone. After that, I put out some alcohol as an offering, then put my hands together.

I hadn't come here for a long time. Long ago, any time anything had happened I'd come to report it, but lately, my visits had grown less frequent. We still came once a year with the whole family…but that wasn't the same, somehow. That annual visit, it seemed to me, was more of a custom than a visit to see Paul. There wasn't enough gratitude in it.

"Hey, Dad. Everyone's doing great."

With this first announcement out of the way, I went on to give him a rundown of recent events. I did this every year, but you know, just in case.

"I'll be thirty-four this year."

Thirty-four was the age I'd been when I died in my previous life. Without even thinking about it, I'd gotten that old. For some reason, it felt like getting to thirty-four had taken longer in this world than in the last one. Probably because I'd had more on my plate. That, and I'd traveled way more.

"But even though I'm turning thirty-four, I had a dream where I die at seventy-four.”

Where had that dream come from? Maybe it was just that: a dream. Or maybe the Man-God had been showing me my future—the Man-God sealed away, and me meeting my death in contentment. It had happened the moment that Lara slipped my bracelet off, so the Man-God could have intervened then.

“If that really was the future…”

If the dream had been shown to me by the Man-God, then maybe it had shown the fruits of all the work I’d put in up to now. We had won the Battle of the Biheiril Kingdom. It had really been the last battle—after that, the Man-God no longer had any way to defeat me and Orsted, and so he had given up. Ten years had gone by with no interference from him. There’d been nothing at all.

It might be that he was skulking around in the shadows, but just like Geese and Badigadi had said, I hadn’t heard a peep out of him. Sometimes, I even found myself forgetting what I was doing all this for.

“That means I can stop trying so hard. Right?”

If the Man-God really had given up, if my work was really at an end, then I could cut back to about half the work I was doing now and live a more laid-back life. I could spend one whole day in every three or so on devoting myself to baby-making with my wives, or teaching all sorts of things to my children… A quiet life like that didn’t sound so bad.

“Just kidding,” I said, laughing. What an idea! Even if the Man-God had given up on me, so what? It wasn’t like I hated my job now. I wasn’t suffering. I was getting things ready to lead Orsted to victory in the battle to come. It was a blast. Yeah, there were hard times, and painful times besides, but never enough that I wanted to run away from it. There were things I had to take care of, tasks I wanted to do, new challenges to try. For all I knew, making me feel like everything was okay now was the Man-God’s plot.

“I’m going to keep on giving it my all, Dad.”

I’d just keep on going as I always had. It had been a dream, I decided. A dream born out of hope, showing me what I wanted to see.

“Please watch over me,” I said, just like I said every time. Then, I put my hands together once more.

The fact I existed had to mean there was a world after death. Only, that didn’t necessarily mean Paul was here in this grave. He’d be off enjoying himself somewhere else. There might not be any reason at all to come here.

I was okay with that. This was a ritual. From today, I was going to go on trying my best, and pledging that in front of Paul’s grave mattered to me.

“Oh, and Geese…” Geese’s grave was next to Paul’s. I laid an offering on it, then put my hands together. I wasn’t sure what Geese thought about this, but then, it wasn’t like the guy had wholeheartedly wanted to destroy me or anything.

“If you don’t like how things worked out, you can tell me about it in forty years… Though I might live longer than that. Or I might die sooner.”

I didn’t want to gloss over Geese’s death, but a lot of my feelings over that time had faded in the past ten years. What I remembered now was his smile. He’d always been wearing that stupid grin and talking about jinxes. Imagining it now, I could only think of it as a good memory. No one I loved had died because of Geese. I had no reason to hold a grudge.

Now that he was gone, I could at least visit his grave.

“Right, I’ll be back soon. Probably with the family, next time.”

I stood up. I wasn’t going to change anything just because of a weird dream. I was going to do what I wanted to, and what I had to. That was all.

And with that, I set off back to the house where my family was waiting.

Story 3:
The World After Death

I FOUND MYSELF in a white room.

"Hey."

"Howdy."

The pixelated asshole here was in good shape as usual. Just because he was sealed in here, of course, didn't mean he was moping. He was as pixelated as ever, so…

"That stuff I saw forty years back… That was future vision, huh?"

"You got it."

The Man-God was the same as ever. But forty, even fifty years had passed since I saw him last. His "same as ever" qualities had long since faded into my distant memory. I did remember him being just as arrogant back when we first met as he was now, though.

"I thought if you saw that you might cut me a bit of slack."

"Lost that bet, huh?"

"Whatever. I was doomed anyway."

I wasn't so weak-willed that I'd give up on everything I'd worked for just because of one dream. Though admittedly, I might have if it *hadn't* been in the form of a dream.

"That was what you looked like, huh," he said.

I looked at myself. The big, blubbery body…was gone. At some point, my appearance had changed. I was in pretty good shape—you could see muscle definition, and my abs were trim and toned. It was the kind of body that looked like it could float like a butterfly. It was the body I'd grown used to in this world… The body of Rudeus Greyrat. I couldn't see my own face, but I didn't feel like it was very old.

"You didn't know?"

"No. My eyes see straight to the soul. I knew there was something different between your body and your soul, but this is the first time I've actually seen you."

He was really dropping some hot new information on me now! Then again, I didn't know what the Man-God looked like either. Technically, we were even.

How come my body's only just changed to look like this now? Actually, never mind. I don't need an answer.

"Anyhow. This is the end of the line for you," said the Man-God.

"Yeah," I replied at length.

I'd died, at seventy-four years old. It was hazy, but I remembered my final moments. I was surrounded by my children and my grandchildren. I think I was happy at the end. At the very least, it was a world away from the final moments in my previous life. When I compared it to that lonely, powerless, pathetic, pitiful end…

"It'll make things easier for me with you out of the picture."

"That so?"

"While you were alive, everything I tried to do came to nothing. So I had a think. I took a leaf from your book, and ever so slowly, I've been building up my allies."

"You still haven't quit, huh?"

The Man-God's mood changed. Now he was angry.

"Obviously," he said. "Would you give up if you knew that future was coming? Always alone, unable to do anything, see anything—and spending ten or even a hundred thousand years like that. I know I couldn't live like that. How could I give up?"

Okay, fair enough. Can't imagine it turning into such an epic thing, though.

Still, I understood a little of what he felt. If you knew that something was going to happen to you, the sort of future that awaited you, and that you'd regret it unless you acted now, you wouldn't be able to sit back and let it happen.

"Yeah, I guess you can't quit."

"What're you acting so ambivalent for? Think you've already won or something?"

"You have a plan then?"

"I do. And now I know that Orsted loops through these same two hundred years. Also, you had too many descendants. I thought of a way to use that. Over the past fifty years, I've gotten everything ready…"

"That so?"

"Is what I'm saying getting through to you? I'm going to turn everything you built against you, then spoil it. Once you're gone from this world, I'm going to use what you made to win. And there's nothing you can do about it because, in the end, you're dead! You can't do anything to stop your descendants from feuding and murdering each other. You can't come to me crying 'Please, stop this!'. You won't even be able to see it!"

While the Man-God's gleeful spiel went on, I scratched my face, then while I was at it, I scratched the back of my head too. Not because I was itchy—I just wasn't really sure how I was supposed to respond.

"You don't say?" I said.

"What the hell?!" he yelled, stamping his foot up and down. "Why the hell are you so smug?!"

"Probably because I'm dead," I said promptly. The Man-God didn't seem to know what to say to that.

I closed my eyes and thought back on everything that had happened up until now. In this world, I'd done the things I wanted to do. I got married, and I made friends. I had children and lots of grandchildren. I even excelled at my job. True, it troubled me to hear the Man-God talking about the future, and there were things I thought I ought to have done better. But somehow, mysteriously, I had no regrets. No…maybe I ought to say I had no unfinished business. I was worried and anxious, but I didn't feel the urge to do something about it. Hearing the Man-God talk now, I wasn't filled with the need to find some way to resurrect myself and save my children.

If I had to guess, I'd say it's because I thought all of them—kids and grandkids both—would work things out themselves from now on. Just as I'd done myself, I trusted the kids to apply themselves to whatever problems came at them and do their best to overcome them.

I slowly walked towards the Man-God. He was far smaller than I'd thought. Up until now, neither of us had gotten any closer to the other than was necessary, so I hadn't had a good idea of his size.

"I'm content," I said. I'd lived plenty. I wouldn't say everything was perfect, and I'd surely left a few things undone. When I closed my eyes, not all the memories I saw were good. There were failures as well as successes, but even so, I wouldn't have done it over. I was dead. My job was over, and I could hand over what came next to the living. It was crazy to feel this way when the guy in front of me was telling me he planned on doing them harm. But I couldn't do anything about it. My heart was so at peace I could scarcely believe it.

"Hey, Man-God?"

He didn't say anything.

"I'm pretty sure I tried to tell you this once."

"What," he said finally.

"I don't think I actually hated you that much."

I think the Man-God looked sour.

Sure, maybe I only thought it because right at that moment, I was winning. Sylphie and Roxy were still alive, and our children were all healthy. Eris had died before me, but she'd reached the end of her life—it hadn't been the Man-God's fault. If some little thing had gone differently, I could have ended up hating the Man-God with every fiber of my being. I might have turned into a machine whose only purpose was killing the Man-God, like the me from the future. I doubt he was able to die feeling as peaceful as I did now. The person I was now was a result of how things had happened to turn out, nothing more.

"What are you *talking* about?" the Man-God said.

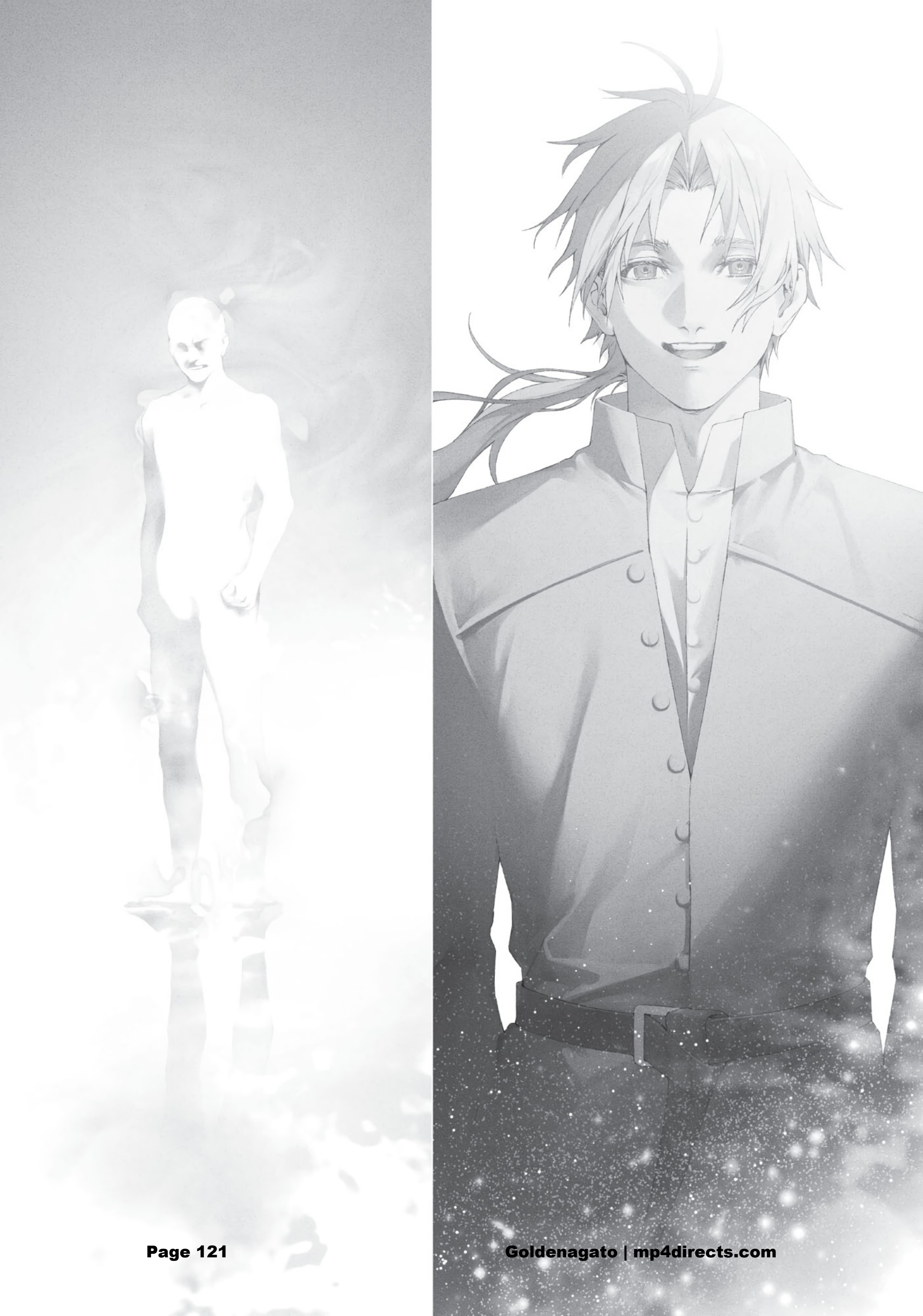
"I don't really know myself. But I think it's thanks to you I'm able to feel so peaceful. If I hadn't had such a clear enemy, I don't think I'd be so content now."

Right. That was it. If not for the Man-God, I'd probably have started getting lazy around when I turned twenty.

I'd have married Sylphie, worked reasonably hard, and tried a reasonable amount. I'd have come to the end of a reasonable life, feeling reasonably content, and then died. That would've been that. A life like that wouldn't have been bad, in and of itself, but there's no way it would have brought me the contentment I felt now. Even if I didn't actually regret anything before I died, I might have wanted another chance, or to do something over, or to go back to some point in the past.

It was only having a clear enemy and a clear goal that kept me moving to the end. That had turned me into the person I was now.

“Keep talking all you like,” the Man-God muttered. “I’m still not going to let them off easily.”



"Oh… I mean, um, that wasn't why I said it…"

What was I trying to say? It wasn't that there was anything I really wanted to say to the Man-God. Just because I didn't hate him didn't mean I particularly liked him. I obviously wasn't planning on thanking him, either.

With that, our conversation petered out and we stood there in silence. The atmosphere was unbearable.

Then, suddenly, something occurred to me. "I wonder why I came to this world," I said, trying out the words.

"Like I know," the Man-God muttered.

"You really don't know anything about it?"

"If I'd known, I'd have stopped it. You genuinely came out of nowhere—so out of nowhere that even I didn't notice until the Displacement Incident."

"Huh…"

In the end, we never got to the bottom of the Displacement Incident during my lifetime either. Nanahoshi had come up with a weird hypothesis, and something else might happen in the future…

"If someone out there deliberately reincarnated me, thank them for me."

"No way."

"Yeah, figures." He'd turned me down flat. Ah, well. The Man-God probably had a lot of bitterness he was dying to vent.

"So, what happens to me next? I mean, I know I died."

"Yeah, about that." The Man-God looked at me, still irritated. "Normally, your soul would turn back into mana, mix with other mana, and be reconstituted into something else. But you're from another world, so I don't know what happens in your case."

"Right."

I'd thought maybe I'd be able to see Paul and Geese again after I died, but I guess not. It made sense, but I was still disappointed… Oh, well. My bones should've been buried in the same place. I'd have to be content with that.

…

I noticed my body was slowly fading. Was this what turning back into mana looked like? This must be how death worked in this world. Perhaps, right before they died, the other residents of this world came to this white room too. Only, if the Man-God didn't feel like seeing them, they'd just wait here to fade away. In that sense, he was a bit like Yama, the God who judged you after death. This guy showed up when people died to smirk and mock them about their lives, though…so a nasty Yama.

"Ugh…"

The Man-God wasn't sporting his usual smirk. He was actually tapping his foot as though he couldn't disguise his annoyance. He'd wanted to gloat to me about his victory and see me consumed by regret as I faded away, and he was pissed off because I'd shrugged him off.

He really was a piece of work.

I stood in front of him. "Look, maybe this isn't for me to say," I began. I vaguely put a hand on his shoulder. "But give it your all, okay?"

Is he going to get mad… I thought. But the Man-God only sighed and slumped his shoulders. Then, he fell silent.

As I looked down at him, I cast an eye over our surroundings. It was pure white, as usual. And empty. My body was on the verge of disappearing entirely, and little by little, my consciousness was fading too. Maybe I'd go back to my old world. Maybe I'd become something else in this world. Maybe I'd keep my memories. Maybe I wouldn't. I didn't know what would happen, but whatever it was, I didn't mind. Even if my mind and memories remained, even if I was born into a place a million times worse than my former life, I'd be all right.

"See you around."

Those were my last words. As my consciousness slipped away, I passed the Man-God and started to walk. I went on straight ahead and didn't turn back…

The End

Appendix:
The Asuran Kingdom's Dossier on Rudeus Greyrat

THE SUBJECT RUDEUS GREYRAT is extremely famous. Today, his name is inscribed in the histories of every nation on the map. Many researchers will have had the experience of casually glancing at letters or an artifact only to realize they were signed "Rudeus Greyrat." Whether in a corner of the teleportation circles drawn in all the nations of the world, in the appendices of the new editions of the magic textbook, or on the side of a bridge on a road, his name appears everywhere. Those alive today who have encountered his name likely outnumber those who haven't.

However, many would be at a loss to describe what he truly did.

Some might recognize him as "the greatest magician of the 400s, Armored Dragon Era." Others might know him as "an academic genius who turned formal education on its head," or "an intellectual who had a transformative influence on the culture around toys and figurines."

Even then, there are very few records of what he began and what he left behind. In each field, other names come to mind before his: in magic, Silent Sevenstar; in education, Roxy M. Greyrat; and in art, Zanoba Shirone. Because of this, some believe that he was "a hanger-on whose only talent was brownnosing the powerful," while others call him "a con artist who cozied up to those with talent in order to steal their glory."

Some even claim that "There was no one person named Rudeus Greyrat. Rather, it was a title bestowed upon members of Ruquag's Mercenary Band for a great accomplishment. Thus, multiple people bear the name."

Theories abound about Rudeus Greyrat, but one thing is certain—that whatever it was he achieved changed the world. As time goes on, that knowledge will fade into the dark corners of history without any one deed truly ascribed to him. To let this mystery fade would be to lose knowledge of historical importance. And so, it is my intention to create an entry in the archive compiling the evidence of the life and existence of Rudeus Greyrat.

—485 Armored Dragon Era Head Archivist
Jed Bluewolf of the Royal Asuran Archive

Rudeus Greyrat

Summary

Rudeus Greyrat (407-481 Armored Dragon Era) was a magician from the Kingdom of Ranoa. In 430, he joined the ranks of the Seven Great Powers. He was one of the great magicians of the 400s, alongside Roxy M. Greyrat and Silent Sevenstar. He also went by the aliases “Quagmire,” “the Dragon God’s Right Hand,” “the Magician King,” “the Great Magician,” and the “silent caster” among others. On the other hand, his cowardice in battle also led to him being given such names “spineless,” “groveler,” “yellowbelly,” and “the frightened rabbit.” In his later years, his many epithets led to his title “Seven-Named Rudeus.”

Life

YOUTH

Rudeus Greyrat was born in 407 in the village of Buena in Fittoa, Asura, the eldest son of the low-ranking Asuran knight Paul (388–413) and the former adventurer-turned-healer Zenith (390–459). The young Rudeus is said to have used intermediate-level magic around the age of three. His father, recognizing his son’s potential, hired Roxy Migurdia (373–) to tutor him. As a result of her spartan education regimen, he became a Saint-tier water magician at the age of five. Rudeus would go on to display talent surpassing that of his teacher, but he would continue to hold her in high regard until his death. At the age of seven, the Boreas Greyrats, the governors of Fittoa at the time, took notice of his talent and asked him to come to them as a tutor. There, he taught magic to Eris Boreas Greyrat (later known as Mad Sword King Eris) while also taking up the creation of figurines using earth magic.

Despite possessing talent that set him apart from other children, Rudeus is said to have cried over missing his parents when they did not visit even on his tenth birthday, as one would expect from a child his age.

In the Displacement Incident of 417, he and Eris were transported to the

Biegoya Region of the Demon Continent. It was there that he befriended Ruijerd Superdia, at the time known and feared under the epithet “Dead End.” As an adventurer, he embarked on a journey from the Demon Continent back to Fittoa in Asura on the Central Continent. It was at this time he first met Zanoba Shirone and Cliff Grimor, who were to become his lifelong friends. In his thirteenth year, he saw Eris back to Fittoa, then set off for the north of the Central Continent to search for his missing family. This was when he made a name for himself as the adventurer Rudeus “Quagmire” Greyrat.

STUDENT YEARS

In 422, Rudeus moved to the Magic City of Sharia in Ranoa, where he entered the Magic University on the recommendation of Jenius Halfas. There, he outshone Linia Dedoldia, Pursena Adoldia, Silent Sevenstar, and Immortal Demon King Badigadi and earned a reputation as the greatest magician at the university. The following year, a sixteen-year-old Rudeus married the magician guardian of Ariel Anemoi Asura, Sylphiette, after a long period of courtship. It is at this point that he seems to have put down roots in Sharia and decided to spend the rest of his days there.

That same year he received word from his father Paul that his mother Zenith had been found on the Begaritt continent, and so he traveled there. With Paul and Silent Sevenstar’s aid, he was able to use a teleportation circle that had miraculously survived to make the journey. Together with Paul, Elinalise Dragonroad, Talhand, Geese, and Roxy Migurdia, he braved and defeated the Teleportation Labyrinth. In the battle with the Manatite Hydra, the guardian of the labyrinth, Paul was killed. Although he rescued his Zenith, the Displacement Incident had left her in a mindless state. Rudeus was plunged into the depths of depression. It was his teacher, Roxy Migurdia, who saved him. This is how Rudeus came to take her as his second wife.

In 415, Rudeus and Eris Boreas Greyrat fought Dragon God Orsted in a forest on the outskirts of Sharia. The reason for the battle is unknown, but some theorize that Dragon God Orsted meant harm to Ariel Anemoi Asura, and Rudeus was acting to protect her. After this battle, Eris Boreas Greyrat became his third wife. In the same year, Rudeus fought in the Asuran civil war on the side of Ariel Anemoi Asura. He did battle with North Emperor Auber Corbet, North King Wi Taa, and Water God Reida and defeated them, for which he was called the architect of Ariel Anemoi Asura’s ascension to the throne.

Rudeus established Ruquag’s Mercenary Band in the Magic City of Sharia in 417. Though he took the role of chairman, he is believed to have delegated all actual running of the Company to his younger sister Aisha.

In his twentieth year, he and Zanoba Shirone allied themselves with Pax Shirone to fight in the Shirone Kingdom's war of defense. They engaged the enemy force from the north at Fort Karon. Rudeus is said to have killed over ten thousand people in this battle. Following his graduation from the Magic University in 419, he journeyed to the Holy Country of Millis with Cliff Grimor.

While there is no detailed account of that time, he is believed to have applied himself to deepening his friendship with the Blessed Child, as well as to appointing Cliff Grimor to a position of importance in the Millis Church.

In 430, he fought alongside Dragon God Orsted in the Biheiril Kingdom. In the course of that battle, he overcame North God Kalman III and so became one of the Seven Great Powers.

YEARS IN THE SEVEN GREAT POWERS

Following his ascension to the Seven Great Powers, Rudeus ceases to appear at the center of events. This may account for why, in the present, he enjoys less recognition than other great names of the same generation: Silent Sevenstar, the Witch Nanahoshi who stepped into the spotlight more or less as Rudeus stepped out, and Roxy M. Greyrat, who later became headmistress of the Magic University. Both are more widely known.

Because of this, few are aware that he was one of the Seven Great Powers. It has been proposed that Rudeus died in the Biheiril Battle, and the one who appeared afterward was a body double, or that it was only a name. As records remain of his involvement in the establishment of Ariel National University, these theories can be immediately discounted.

It is unknown what Rudeus was trying to achieve by stepping out of the public eye. Sources indicate that, as a follower of the Dragon God, he enjoyed the friendship of figurine-maker and president of the Doll Making Company Zanoba Shirone, Pope Cliff Grimor of the Millis Church, the Blessed Child of the Millis Church, Queen Ariel Anemoi Asura of Asura, Death God Randolph of the King Dragon Kingdom, the Doldias of the Great Forest, and Immortal Demon King Atofe of the Demon Continent. It is believed that he was attempting to bring the world under one banner in preparation for the resurrection of Laplace eighty years hence.

Other sources call him a paragon of wickedness who resurrected the forbidden teleportation circles as part of a plot to use their expediency to achieve world domination.

DEATH

Rudeus’s wife, Sylphiette Greyrat, announced his death from old age in 481. He passed away peacefully in his bed at the age of seventy-four. An extraordinary five thousand people came rushing in to attend his funeral. Also present, after disappearing even more completely than all but Rudeus himself, was Dragon God Orsted.

Equipment

Magicians usually bear a staff and favor suppression attacks at long range. Rudeus, however, engaged in close range combat.

AQUA HEARTIA

A staff given to him by the Boreas family on his tenth birthday. It was made from the arm of an Elder Treant, native to the eastern reaches of the Great Forest on the Millis Continent. Its magic stone was an ultramarine blue water stone, an A-rank item from a wandering Sea Dragon in the north of the Begaritt Continent.

The staff was made by Rod Director Chein Procyon. Although extremely powerful, Rudeus ceased to use it after the completion of the Magic Armor (see below).

MAGIC ARMOR VERSION ONE

A prototype set of magic armor crafted with the assistance of Zanoba Shirone and Cliff Grimor. It stood around three meters tall. A Stone Cannon Gatling gun was mounted on its right arm and it bore a shield and stone of absorption in the left. While it consumed vast amounts of mana, it is believed to have possessed offensive and defensive capabilities on a level with the Seven Great Powers. Rudeus built it to fight Dragon God Orsted, then continued to make use of it after allying with his would-be enemy. However, it was destroyed by the Fighting God in the Battle of Biheiril.

MAGIC ARMOR VERSION TWO

A jet-black set of armor composed of arm, leg, and body parts. A detuned model of the Version One. This armor gives the wearer the abilities of a Saint-tier sword fighter.

MAGIC ARMOR VERSION ZERO

Rudeus’s ultimate weapon that was used in the Battle of Biheiril. Details unknown.

MAGIC ARMOR VERSION THREE

The Magic Armor used by Rudeus in his later years. Standing around two meters tall, it possessed the same functionality as the Version One. The General Purpose Magic Armor Series that came later is said to have been based on the Version Three.

STONE CANNON GATLING GUN

A bundle of staff-type magical implements that fire stone cannons without regard for mana expenditure. When activated, the Gatling gun fires off stone cannons at a tremendous rate, consuming so much mana that any ordinary person would be drained to zero in moments. It was created by Magical Implement Director Jacqueline of the Ranoa Kingdom.

STONE CANNON SHOTGUN

A version of the Gatling gun above configured to shoot twelve times in a single burst. It was created by Magical Implement Director Jacqueline of the Ranoa Kingdom.

PAUL’S SWORD

A magic item that cuts better the harder its target. This is the most famous of Paul’s swords, though as an adventurer, he favored a different weapon.

Spells

Rudeus was proficient in all schools of magic. As one might guess from the name Quagmire, he particularly favored earth and water magic.

Rudeus is said to have utilized a wide range of spells depending on his opponent, so here I shall list the most common ones.

STONE CANNON

A well-known Intermediate-level spell. It shoots a chunk of rock at high speed at one’s opponent. However, when Rudeus used the spell with unvoiced casting, it carried enough power to disintegrate an immortal demon king. He also used variations including Blast Cannon and Stone Shot.

QUAGMIRE

An example of Rudeus’s patented combination magic. Rudeus is supposed to have been able to conjure a quagmire large enough to submerge an entire town.

DEEP MIST

Another example (as above) of Rudeus’s combination magic. It is said he could conjure enough mist to conceal an entire forest.

ELECTRIC

Rudeus’s original spell, condensing the King-tier water magic Lightning. By using this spell in close combat, Rudeus was able to neutralize an immortal demon king in a single hit.

SHOCK WAVE

A wind spell that creates a pulse in the air to send one’s opponent flying. Rudeus allegedly used this spell in close combat to fight as though he were flying.

Research

Over the course of his life, Rudeus researched and developed many spells and magical implements. He also funded a range of different research fields.

A LEARNING METHOD FOR UNVOICED MAGIC

Rudeus Greyrat was said to have used voiceless magic from a young age. His teacher, Roxy M. Greyrat, wrote up his method for voiceless magic as a paper, developing a didactic method for the skill. This method was enthusiastically implemented by the three great magic universities into their magical education programs, contributing to the emergence of many talented magicians.

MANA RECOVERY THERAPY (MAGIC POTION)

With funding from Rudeus, Silent Sevenstar developed a drink that restores mana. This so-called magic potion unshackled magicians from the whims of their magic reserves. This, combined with the learning method above, was so influential it is said to have “ended the era of sword fighter supremacy” by raising the status of magicians.

MAGICAL PROSTHETICS

Magical prosthetics have helped a great many people: adventurers, for instance, or those too poor to access healing magic beyond Saint- or King-tier. These prosthetics were the result of research by Zanoba Shirone and Cliff Grimor, made possible through funding provided by Rudeus. It was Silent Sevenstar who popularized the magical prosthetics not as magical implements but as medical tools.

MAGIC ARMOR

Rudeus was implied to be the only one who could operate the Magic Armor. In time, the Greyrats’ third daughter, Lily Greyrat, took over his research and in 483 perfected the General Purpose Magic Armor. This development significantly reduced the risk of hunting large monsters.

MAGIC DOLLS

With funding provided by Rudeus, Zanoba Shirone successfully developed a magical figurine. These figurines look exactly like humans. They are used in a wide variety of ways: serving as cherished pets, performing odd tasks, testing for poison, and working as scouts. However, they are enormously expensive and few in number. At present only the royalty of nations who enjoyed Rudeus's friendship use them.

TELEPORTATION CIRCLES

With funding provided by Rudeus, Silent Sevenstar researched and revived the forbidden teleportation circles. With teleportation circles placed in strategic locations throughout the different nations, the danger of long journeys was mitigated and travel to distant lands became simple.

Rudeus is said to have broken the taboo after reflecting on the death of his father Paul in the Teleportation Labyrinth. Records suggest that the actual research was conducted by Silent Sevenstar, with Rudeus as her sponsor. However, for some unknown reason old merchant and noble families, along with those involved in the Millis Church, curse Rudeus as the "taboo breaker."

Memoirs and Code

It is believed that the records of the research above were written in the fifty-two volumes that form the *Book of Rudeus*. Since they are written entirely in a code only used between himself and Silent Sevenstar that is yet to be fully decrypted, however, their credibility is questionable.

Build and Character

Rudeus was approximately 175 centimeters tall and had, for a magician, a comparatively strong and muscular build. He had pale skin, and his eyes were mismatched, as used the eye of foresight right eye and the Eye of Distant Sight for his left. He is never described as handsome, but his wife Sylphiette is said to have thought, "Looking at his face for just a few seconds was enough to make me weak at the knees" when they met at the Magic University. His other wives, Eris Greyrat and Roxy M. Greyrat, didn't make any comment on his looks, but we can assume he wasn't exceptionally ugly.

His preferred outfit is supposed to have been a light gray robe without a hat. He was disinterested in clothing in his youth. It is written in the remaining records that while attending university he “wore a robe fraying at the hem,” and in the Asura Kingdom “a number of nobles looked disapprovingly at his strange appearance when he presented himself in the audience chamber.” He came to pay more attention to his personal appearance after turning twenty, and around 430 Armored Dragon King Perugius commented that, “he has made himself more presentable lately.” While insensitive to his own appearance, he was fastidious about cleanliness, renovating a room of his home into a large bath which he is said to have used every day.

Rudeus was feared in Sharia, but he was also more beloved than any other magician, as can be seen in his grand funeral and the many mourners who attended, as well as in the monument erected in a corner of the Magic University engraved with Rudeus’s own words.

Rudeus is believed to have been sociable, with a kind and good-natured personality, but his intense libido did not go without comment. Descriptions remain of how he touched and fondled his wives without any restraint or regard for watchers-on. He was, in fact, devoted to his wives and never made a move on other women, so some historians opine that his lechery is a groundless rumor. In addition, he was of such a gentle disposition that he smiled through insults and violence directed at him, but when harm came to his family or friends he would get into such a fury that at times he became violent.

The following anecdotes describe Rudeus’s personality:

“At a party in the Asura Kingdom, when a noble made fun of Rudeus’s wife, Rudeus seized him by the throat and dragged him out of the party, burned a whole forest to ash before his eyes, and demanded an apology.”

“When his great friends Linia and Pursena broke a figurine modeled on his wife, Rudeus punished them in the most humiliating way possible for beastfolk.”

“When Perugius invited Rudeus to the floating fortress to name his child, Rudeus, misunderstood and thought Perugius intended to harm the child. He appeared fully armed and threatened Perugius that there would be war if any harm came to his child.”

** It should be noted that the veracity of these anecdotes is unconfirmed.*

While Rudeus is not generally well-known, the majority of the world's most prominent figures know of him and regard him with admiration or awe.

A piece of white cloth was found in his pocket after his death. His wife Roxy hurried to hide it, leading to rumors that some great secret might be concealed within it. It is unclear whether those rumors contain any shred of truth.

He is said to be the origin point for the Theory of Critical Period for Mana Capacity, namely that mana capacity can be strengthened in early childhood, and is resultantly responsible for its incorporation into education.

He loved rice, eggs, and the ogre water of the Biheiril Kingdom. He is also said to have had an unsavory habit of eating eggs raw.

Records indicate he worshipped some unknown dark god. Puzzlingly, no gods can be matched to the coat of arms he worshipped—we can assume this god disappeared in antiquity, or Rudeus perhaps created this god for himself. Some also theorize that he was irreligious, or that he worshipped the Dragon God.

Family & Relatives

THE GREYRAT FAMILY

A high-ranking noble family in the Asura Kingdom. It contains the four families of Notos, Boreas, Zephyros, and Euros. All four families governed their own large domain, which is why they are also called the Four Great Houses. Rudeus was a direct descendant of the Notos Greyrats, but his father Paul ran away from his family and was therefore expunged from the Notos Greyrat family tree.

PAUL GREYRAT: father. Eldest son of the Notos Greyrats, a high-ranking Asuran noble family. Ran away as a young man and became an adventurer. Later, he met Zenith, then appealed to his old friend Philip Boreas Greyrat and became a low-ranking knight of the Fittoa Region.

ZENITH GREYRAT: mother. Second daughter of the Latrias of the Holy Land of Millis.

LILIA GREYRAT: maid. Paul's lover.

NORN GREYRAT: legitimate younger sister. Novelist.

AISHA GREYRAT: younger sister by his stepmother. Advisor to Ruquag's Mercenary Band.

SYLPHIETTE GREYRAT: wife. One quarter elf.

ROXY M. GREYRAT: wife. Demon (of the Migurd). Headmistress of the Magic University.

ERIS GREYRAT: Wife. Human. Sword King.

LUCIE GREYRAT: eldest daughter.

LARA GREYRAT: second daughter.

ARS GREYRAT: eldest son.

SIEGHEART SALADIN GREYRAT: second son.

LILY GREYRAT: third daughter.

CHRISTINA GREYRAT: fourth daughter.

OTHER ASSOCIATED INDIVIDUALS

ZANOBA SHIRONE: upperclassman at the Magic University. A former prince of Shirone. President of a figurine company. Blessed Child of fantastic strength. The publication of the picture book *The Superd's Adventure* was largely thanks to his and Norn's efforts. Zanoba respected Rudeus as his mentor, but Rudeus always said, "When it comes to knowledge of figurines, Zanoba's the best."

CLIFF GRIMOR: upperclassman at the Magic University. Later became the pope of the Millis Church. He is said to have protected Rudeus, who was often in some trouble or other with the Millis Church. Rudeus reportedly relied on him and is believed to have said with conviction that "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Cliff."

SILENT SEVENSTAR: upperclassman at the Magic University. Also known as the Witch Nanahoshi. She set up teleportation circles in nations throughout the world and collaborated with Rudeus to develop and bring about many revolutionary inventions.

ARIEL ANEMOI ASURA: Queen of the Asura Kingdom. According to the *Chronicle of the Asura Kingdom*, right before her death, she told her trusted retainer Luke that, "it is largely thanks to Rudeus's efforts that the Asura

Kingdom is at peace today. Be sure not to make an enemy of him after my death.”

ALEXANDER K. RYBAK: North God Kalman III. Originally number seven of the Seven Great Powers. The “left hand of the Dragon God.” After Rudeus stepped down from the center stage, Alexander is believed to have gone around the nations of the world as the Dragon God’s representative in his stead.

LINIANA DEDOLDIA: Leader of Ruquag’s Mercenary Band. As the leader of her beastfolk tribe, she is believed to have served as an intermediary between Rudeus and the beastfolk.

PURSENA ADOLDIA: Second-in-command of Ruquag’s Mercenary Band. Like Liliana, as leader of a beastfolk tribe, she is believed to have served as an intermediary between Rudeus and the beastfolk.

PERUGIUS DOLA: The Armored Dragon King, one of the Three Godslayers. A prominent figure in the Asura Kingdom and Silent Sevenstar’s mentor. There are frequent references to Rudeus in The Chronicle of the Asura Kingdom, but the nature of his relationship with Rudeus is unknown.

ORSTED: The Dragon God. Number two of the Seven Great Powers. Though Rudeus’s covert activities are assumed to have been in service to Orsted’s goals, details of these activities are unknown. Orsted very rarely appeared center stage, but he attended Rudeus’s funeral and allegedly was with the family to witness Rudeus’s death.

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—Recorded by Deputy Head Archivist
Clule Elrond of the Royal Asuran Archive

Afterword
(Excerpted from The Book of Rudeus, Vol. 26)

RIGHT, SO UP UNTIL NOW I've just been scribbling things down in this diary. Now that I've filled over twenty-five books and made a bit of a name for myself, I've had this strange idea. Maybe, just maybe, someone might read this.

I wrote it all in Japanese, so theoretically, no one in this world should be able to read it. Still, someone with too much free time might decode it, and after I die, someone else who came from the same world as me might read it.

…I'd feel pretty bad if someone actually put all the effort into decoding these when there's nothing all that important written in them. But I mean, that's just what diaries are like, right?

Whatever purpose someone decodes it for, it won't go out into the world until after I'm dead. I'd like to record for later generations that Dragon God Orsted wasn't a bad person.

And then there's that *other* thing…

Okay, so as I've written a few times in these diaries, I'm not originally from this world. I died in another world and was reborn here. I've decided not to write my name from my previous life. If the person reading this knew the person I was in my old world, they might get the wrong idea. Still, I might have a previous life, but aside from that I'm not actually special. If you've decoded this diary and are reading it, you'll know that I lived an ordinary life in this world. I didn't choose to be reborn, and in the end, I never found out what caused it. No big deal.

I just lived the best life I could—so that if I died the next day, I'd have no regrets. That's what's important.

You may scoff at that, whoever it is who's reading this diary. Maybe you're thinking, "He was just lucky with where he was born," or, "Easy for this guy to say when he was blessed with talent." Or maybe you've seen my portrait, so you put it down to my pretty face…

I mean, as I wrote in here the other day, Cliff told me his classmates said things like that. They said he had an unfair advantage because he'd been born into good circumstances, and they hadn't. He said he felt really uncomfortable about it. That made me think about my own privileges. To be honest, my own upbringing was pretty cushy. Paul, my father, was a scumbag when it came to women, but he wasn't a bad person. The real scumbag stuff was how he got caught cheating, then lied about it even though there was damning evidence, then played dumb, then lashed out like he was the victim… If I cheated, then tried to pull something like that, Eris would beat me up, Sylphie would hate me, and Roxy would have nothing but contempt. I'd end up losing everything.

Jeez, that's a scary thought.

I couldn't have asked for a better mother than Zenith. She was young when her mind failed, but when you consider what it's usually like to care for a bedridden person by comparison, it wasn't so bad. I did end up pretty much entirely handing her off to Lilia and Sylphie, but compared to my previous life, where I wasn't able to do anything for my parents, I think I did all right by her. The point is, I was born to parents who loved me. I can't say we wanted for nothing, but at the very least we didn't have any debt, and my parents weren't fighting over money every day. That was kinda lucky.

I also had a talent for magic. I had a leg up from the knowledge from my past life and a vast pool of mana from the Laplace aspect. It's thanks to both that I was able to excel in unvoiced magic. Even if you searched the world over you'd have a hard time finding anyone who can shoot a Stone Cannon harder or faster than me. While I'd like to chalk it up to my own hard work, I'm pretty sure it was the gifts I was born with. Just luck, really.

So far as my looks go, I reckon I'm better off now than I was, but for all that…I still haven't had many women take an interest in me just for my face. On the flip side, I have been treated unfairly because people didn't like my face before. Soldat, for example, said he didn't like the look of me. He might have been talking about my expression, though. Expressions are important, too.

Most people aren't repelled by my face, at any rate. More luck.

I don't doubt it's that good luck that gave me the motivation to try hard. Still, I wonder. What if I'd been even better off? How would I have turned out if, say, I'd been born an Asuran aristocrat, never wanting for money or women or anything else? I know I'm a bit of a perv, and there've been times when that perviness motivated me to work hard. Not having those sorts of things for all those years is what allowed me to appreciate them.

If it'd been easy for me to get with women, if I'd had women throwing themselves at me, and all without having to lift a finger, would I have seen the value in it? I wonder if I wouldn’t have just gotten bored early on and stopped making any effort to make women like me.

The same goes for magic. I’ve worked my ass off practicing magic every single day. My training looks tedious from the outside, but it’s because I kept going with it that I can now wield magic with a high level of precision. What if the first time I picked up a magic textbook I’d been able to cast not just Beginner-tier, but Advanced-tier—or even God-tier magic? Would I have gone on training hard after that?

I think people find value and strive for the things they can’t have—the things that don’t come easily. In the end, we all have to play with the hand we’re dealt, but there’ll always be something in our hand we’re unhappy with. Someone else will be envious of one of your cards while you yourself are unable to see its worth.

I know I sound like I’m bragging, but I do have a past life. My home in my past life was even better off than Paul’s, and as far as talent goes, if I hadn’t given up, I could’ve made something of myself. I’m probably better looking now, but if I’d exercised and slimmed down a bit, and groomed my hair and eyebrows, I wouldn’t have looked half bad. Looking back, I had way more advantages back then than in this life. Despite all that, despite the privilege I had, I stayed a garbage person. When I died, that was what I regretted. So even if I hadn’t been born in a peaceful village like Buena, even if it had been the slums of the Conflict Zone, or if I’d been abused by my parents, or if when I first opened a magic textbook I hadn’t managed to whip up so much as a water bomb… I feel like I’d have still tried my best. I doubt my life would have been as happy as this one. I might have resented the world more. But if nothing else, I think I’d have acted more than I did in my previous life. I think I would have lived with the desperation of a drowning man. I’m sure that life would have been worth more than my previous one.

If anything, even if that truck didn’t hit me and I went on living in my original world without getting reincarnated, if I’d only had a bit of luck, I might have been able to apply myself. Well, okay, it wouldn’t have been easy. I was an incredible sulk back then, so it took the jumbo-size helping of luck that let me be reincarnated to finally get me moving.

What I’m trying to say is that circumstances are all relative, and sometimes “good circumstances” actually means having a few things that seem like disadvantages.

I’m not here to tell you not to blame things on the way things are for you. I know I’ve been privileged. I try to remember there are people in terrible circumstances out there. I don’t mean to pretend to know what that’s like. All I’m saying is that, whether you get a good hand or a bad one, if you want to be satisfied with your life, you have to live life as hard and as fully as you can.

It’s not like those classmates of Cliff’s were that badly off. I guess they were unlucky with their parents, but they had enough drive to get into school through their own efforts and to work towards their goals.

Anyway, for my part, I’ve given my all to my life in this world. Naturally, I’m going to continue to do so. Maybe to others, my “all” seemed a little shallow and unserious. Don’t other people’s lives always seem that way? And no matter what anyone says about you, it’s not going to change your life, so why care about it? You know?

So, hey, if you’re reading this, live your life to the fullest… Ugh, we’re getting real preachy here, huh? I must be getting old. I guess it’s happened. I’ve become a dad.

Right, that’s enough talk about circumstances. It turned into a bit of a lecture.

Now, I wonder who decoded my language. Maybe a scholar or something? Or a magician, expecting some amazing magical secret concealed within the pages of my diary… Either way, sorry for the lack of amazing secrets. I’ve said pretty much all of what I know about magic to Roxy, so it should all be available for you to learn about at the Ranoa Magic University or the Asuran Institute of Magic.

If I were to give one piece of advice to those who follow in my footsteps, it would be that whether you want to learn voiced casting, unvoiced casting, casting with magic circles, or whatever happens to be the hot thing in your day, then reader, you must practice. You cast the same spell over and over again until your head’s spinning, then when you’re resting, you think up clever ways to use it. You devote yourself to it fully.

If you do that, even if you’re not a once-in-a-generation genius, you’ll be skilled enough to earn the respect of your peers.

Right! One more thing. If you’re thinking about translating this diary to offer it up to the ruler of some country, don’t. I get it, translating the language of a different world is impressive, and you want your success to be praised. You want appropriate compensation for your efforts. Thing is, there’s some stuff written in here that looks bad for the Asuran royal family in particular. There’s no way they’ll stand for claims like “the Asuran queen was Dragon God Orsted’s puppet!” It’s their prestige on the line, you know? Ariel might settle for just locking you up, but I can’t guarantee her descendants will spare your life. I guess if all the nations that appear in this diary have disappeared clean off the face of the world, then you can do what you like.

Huh. I suppose if that much time has passed, you might be a historian. If so, I hope you’ll reference this extensively as an example of an ordinary family in this period. Only, I did use my knowledge from my past life to reinvent some uncommon gadgets, so don’t rely on it too much.

And yeah…one more thing. Just in case whoever’s reading this is someone from the same world as me. If, unlike me, you want to go home…I’ll give you a piece of advice.

“There is a way to return to your old world. Follow in the footsteps of Silent Sevenstar.”

Oh yeah, and if you ever dream of a white space with some pixelated asshole giving you advice, *hard* pass. He’s a liar, got it?

Rudeus, over and out.

Epilogue:
Prologue Zero

IN THE YEAR 500 of the Armored Dragon Era, there lived a girl called the Blessed Child of Restoration. There was no life in her eyes. Ever since she was born, they had been empty save for despair. The adults around her found her uncanny and kept their distance.

The girl knew what fate had in store for her. She had known since before birth—only, to say “before birth” is misleading. She had not known before her first, true birth. For this girl had been reborn many times. Again and again, she had repeated the same life. Again and again, she had repeated a life with minute differences each time. Different lives, albeit only slightly…and they all ended the same way. Her life was always fixed. There were never any great upheavals, and those lives always came to the same end.

That end was death. She died. No one living creature may escape death, but her death was a particularly awful one. After being manipulated as a tool by her country, she was captured and murdered by an enemy nation. She was like a toy fought over by children. Sometimes she was brutally raped, sometimes she was eaten alive by monsters, sometimes she was bound and thrown into water…

The girl died in suffering and despair. To her, life was a road that ended in despair. Every day was nothing but another step closer to the executioner’s block. She was without hope.

The girl had a power. She could reverse time for an object by, at most, a single day. With this power, she restored broken things. She could even bring people back from the dead.

A single day. But even the power to bring the dead back to life for just a single day was enough for the Blessed Child to be pressed into service for the nation. The king kept her all to himself.

Her power to reverse a single day freed the king from injury and illness. Mysteriously, she could not stop him from aging, but this was of little importance to the king.

The girl had known three versions of the king. Though his name and appearance never changed, there were small variances in his personality and his conduct. Every time she died, and a new nightmare began, the king she served changed a little. Another, seeing these slight changes, might have praised the king for his wisdom, or condemned him as a fool. None of it mattered to the girl. There was no difference in how any of the kings treated her. To her, the kings all blended into the same monster.

The power that made her a Blessed Child brought her no happiness. She could not turn back her own time, nor could she use her power for her own purposes. All it did was shackle her to the palace that served as her prison.

And then, she died. She was kept like an animal in a corner of the palace, meeting slightly different people every time, until she finally perished. Sometimes her power was insufficient, and she incurred the wrath of the king. Sometimes another nation invaded the kingdom, and she was taken prisoner. Sometimes the kingdom was overrun by demons who slaughtered them all. Her life faded away in misery. And then, she returned to the beginning. She started again from her birth in a remote, rural corner of the kingdom. After spending her early years enduring the adults' disgust, she was taken to the palace, where she would ultimately die yet again.

The girl tried to escape her fate in the beginning. She hid her power so that she could stay with her mother and father. It did no good. For some reason, just before her fifth birthday, soldiers came from the palace and took her away with them. She tried to run away from the village before the soldiers came, but that too was futile. She was either killed by a monster or captured by bandits or kidnappers. Who she was sold on to next varied, but she ended up at the palace without fail. Fate dragged her back to the palace like an antlion's trap, crushed her hope, then murdered her. It was hell—an eternal, unceasing hell cycle that utterly destroyed her. She ceased to feel anything. She followed the king's orders, her face as devoid of expression as a machine. A hundred years passed, then two hundred. Or was it a thousand? Two thousand? Perhaps ten, or twenty thousand. She no longer remembered how many times she had died, or how long she had lived. Her memory was perpetually hazy, and she couldn't recall a single instance of joy.

The moment of her murder was always crystal clear.

Perhaps it was instinct. Some pure animal urge within her that clung to life, that recorded the memory of her murder as something to be avoided. Alas, the result was that her whole life was blotted out by her own deaths. She no longer recalled anything else. Nothing but a chain of memories of death.

Immersed in an endless stream of death, the girl made a wish. She wished with all her heart.

I can’t bear this anymore… Somebody, help me…

In that moment, the laws of the world shifted.

***

Things in her next life had changed.

She was born in a provincial village she couldn’t even name and was taken to the palace. She obeyed the king’s every whim and used her power day in and day out. None of this had changed. But when she was ten, something different happened. Something that had never happened before. It was her tenth birthday. As though to celebrate the occasion, the girl was taken away. She was taken beneath the palace, to a space with a vast magic circle. The girl hadn’t known there was such a magic circle in the palace, for she had never been allowed to walk freely within it.

Several dozen adults stood around the magic circle. They held staffs and wore black robes. Hoods covered their faces. The knowledge she had gleaned from her eternal hell told her that these people were magicians. But what would happen to her next, she did not know. She knew little about magic and magic circles. She had never had the opportunity to learn such things in her hellish prison.

The girl was bound to the magic circle. Her eyes were empty as always. Something new had happened, but it failed to stir her heart at all. She would still die in the end. No matter what happened along the way, nothing would change. This sense of resignation crowded out everything else.

The ritual began. The magic circle relentlessly drew the mana from her body. Blessed Children held an inconceivable volume of mana within their bodies. It was a different stripe of mana to that which was used in magic and swordcraft, and in theory, it could not typically have been used for a magic circle like this one. Was it chance, then, that the magic circle was drawing out her mana? No. This magic circle had been created for a purpose. It was designed to be activated using the mana of the Blessed Child of Restoration. Who had made it? Though they were out of the girl’s sight, the architect was present at the ritual. She observed the magic circle looking only a little less bored than the girl.

The ritual was a success. The magic circle blazed with light. Light in a prism of seven colors—the light of summoning.

Then, when the light died away, there was a boy standing in the middle of the circle.

“It worked.”

“We did it!”

“The kingdom is saved!”

While the magicians celebrated, the boy looked around at his surroundings in amazement. Then, his gaze turned to the girl with empty eyes who sat on the ground in front of him.

“Um… Could you tell me where this is? I was just with Nana and Kuro… huh?”

The language he spoke was unknown to all there, and yet somehow, the girl understood. Perhaps it was because her own mana had been used, or perhaps it was because she was connected to his presence here.

“Oh, um, my name’s Shinohara Akito,” he said. “How about you?”

“I am the Blessed Child of Restoration.”

“Blessed…? Um, I wanted to know your name.”

The girl realized that in every iteration of her personal hell, and in particular after she came to the palace, no one ever asked her name.

A Blessed Child had no name. Perhaps if they were royalty, an exception might be made, but as a rule, Blessed Children had their names taken from them. From that point on. They were only ever referred to as “Blessed Child.” The girl was no exception.

But while usually, Blessed Children had their names taken before they could learn them, the girl remembered her name. She remembered it precisely because she had died so many times.

It was the name her mother and father had given her.

“Lyria,” she said.

“Lyria? That’s a nice name.” The boy smiled, and the girl’s heart sang.

***

The girl felt something had changed. The king released her from her duties as Blessed Child. Instead, she was made the boy's interpreter. After a mage knight joined them as a bodyguard, the three of them wandered freely through the palace.

"Lilia, what's that?" The boy from another world asked her about everything—about the world, about how they lived, about the people in it. Despite dying so many times, the girl knew nothing.

"He asked…what that is."

"That? That's a magical implement. When you put magic into it, fire comes out of the end. I wonder if they're going to the forest to drive out monsters."

The girl, knowing nothing, asked the knight and the knight answered. The mage knight, who was said to be a genius, looked half-asleep but answered all her questions. Unlike the girl, she knew everything.

"Ohh, so it's like a flamethrower…" the boy said. "Come to think of it, there are lots of tree monsters in this world, aren't there? Have you ever seen one, Lilia?"

"Several times," Lilia said slowly. "They…swooshed."

"'Swooshed'…?" The boy laughed. "I can't picture it. No, wait! Actually, I've seen them in movies."

"Movies…?"

"Yeah, a movie is—"

Her life as an interpreter was nothing like her life before. Everything was fresh. Every time the boy learned something about the world, he smiled his easy smile, and every time, the girl's heart sang.

At first, she'd thought nothing would change. She'd thought everything was over for her. But she could dream about the stories the boy sometimes told her about his world. When the knight answered the boy's questions, she felt her world expanding. She learned that this world was unimaginably vast and full of all sorts of people she had never known.

A little while after the boy came, she realized that her food had taste. Her ears opened to the chirping of the birds when she woke in the morning and to enjoy the warmth of the sun.

She felt alive. She believed her stint in hell was over. The boy had come to save her. He had come to pull her out of this long, hellish cycle. She had been born to meet him. Now, her real life would begin.

This is fate, she thought. The boy was so strong and so gentle, and such a support to her, that it seemed true.

But fate betrayed her.

***

War engulfed the kingdom. The girl knew that every time this war came, it swept her up and she died. She knew it better than anyone. But there were things she didn't know: that the boy had been summoned to win the war. That the kingdom's prophet had advised that they summon a champion from another world and have him fight for them. And that after the kingdom had taken the prophet's advice and spent ten years summoning the boy, they were now at a point of no return.

The girl knew nothing. And the boy fought. He did not know war, however. The people of the kingdom knew that the boy did not know how to fight, yet still, they sent him out on the battlefield. They clad him in armor, put a sword in his hand, and placed him on the army's front line. This was what they had summoned him for.

And the boy died. He was mercilessly cut down on the battlefield. As he stood there on trembling legs, an enemy general cut his head off in a single blow, and he died. The enemy general took his head, so it was only his body that came back to the girl. The people of the kingdom, when they saw the dead boy, only sighed and muttered in disgust that, in the end, their champion from another world had been useless. They had been fools to trust the prophet's ravings.

The girl embraced the boy's corpse and tried desperately to restore him, but it was futile. Already more than a day had passed since his death, and he was beginning to rot. The girl's power was of no use here.

She wept and screamed, asking why, why must always suffer so, why was fate so cruel to her alone. She wept, but not only out of grief. She felt like fate was toying with her, laughing at her for trying when no matter what she did, she was doomed. She was overcome with a sense of powerlessness.

Then, the kingdom fell. The girl was captured and, as she had every time before, died in the depths of despair.

Unlike every time before, the girl made a wish. For the first time since she was first born, she wished and wished with all her heart, *I want to live!*

Not that she didn’t want to die, or that she wanted someone to save her.

I want to live with him…!

The time she had spent living with the boy had not been long. But even in that short span, he had stolen her heart and usurped all the memories of death that had filled it.

The boy was hope. He was the first hope the girl had known. That hope kept her head raised high and facing forward. For the first time since she was first born, she turned an eye to her own power. The moment she died, she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, then used her power.

Her power could turn back time for a single day. Or at least, it was believed to do so. Everyone had a vague sense that something was strange about her power, but the ability was so convenient that no one had bothered to investigate any further. Now, the girl forced out so much of her own might that she thought her mind would burst. She used the Power to Alter the Past.

The world looped, with the girl at its center.

***

The girl’s power stretched back into the past to the year 400 of the Armored Dragon Era, to the Citadel of Roa in Fittoa, where the boy she loved had lost his life.

A rift in spacetime opened in the sky above the town. In the depths of the rift was a being with a powerful connection to the boy. This being bore a striking resemblance to the soul of the girl who had wanted to live together with the boy. Thus, to create a future where the boy would be spared, she altered the world and opened a path for him to live. As a result, in the year 500 of the Armored Dragon Era, the boy was saved—or he should have been. Even with the girl’s great power, causing a person who was not supposed to have a future to exist in the past was impossible. It was nothing like preventing someone from being injured or contracting a disease. Though the rift in space-time remained, the being within did not come down into the world. The girl’s power became locked in a bitter stalemate with the power of the world itself.

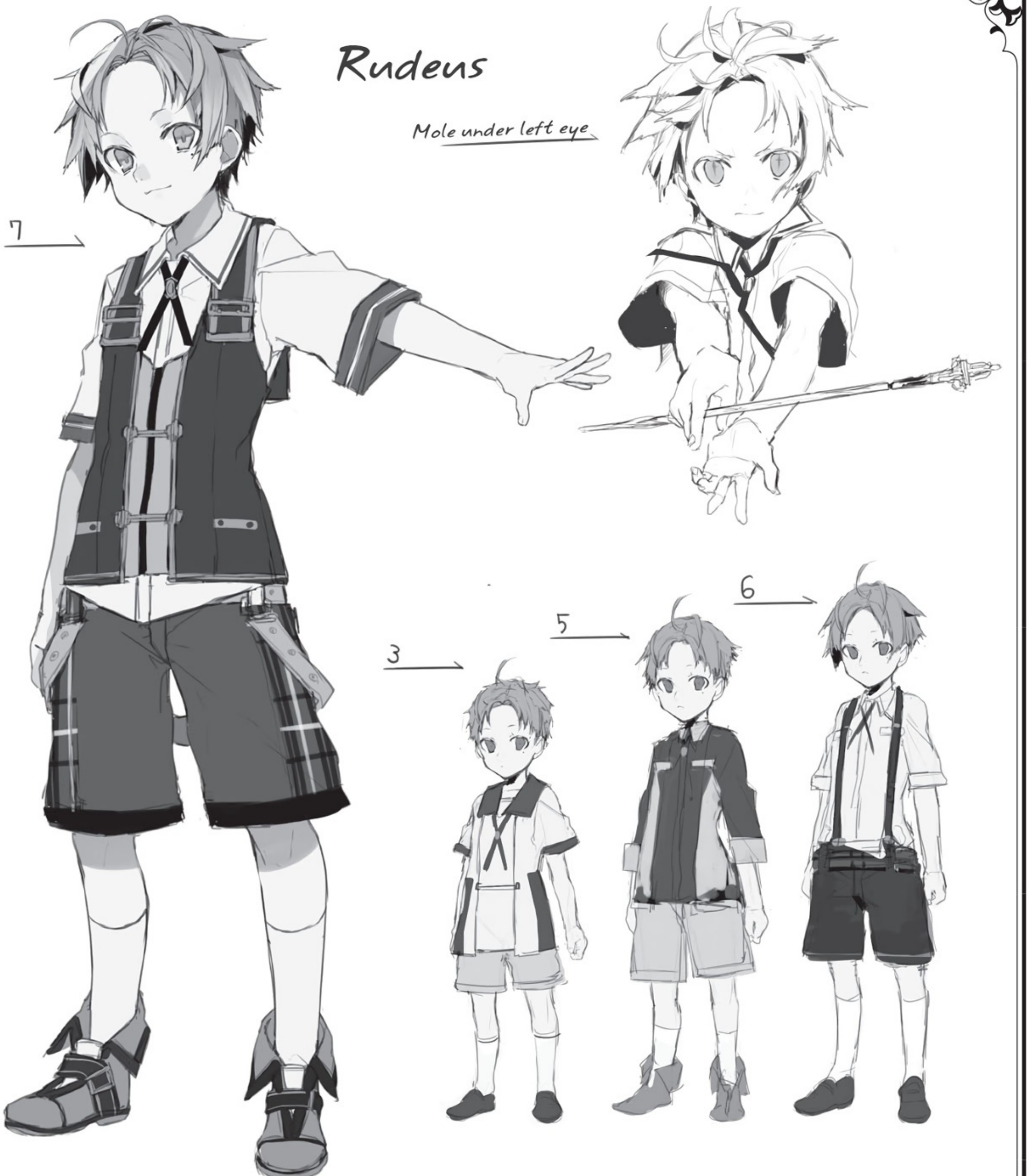
The world moved on, uncaring: 400, 401, 402, 403. But as it did, a single lost soul found its way through the rift. This soul bore no connection to the boy. When the boy was transported, before the girl's power had been used to summon him, this soul had simply happened to be close by. But it *was* a soul, and so it managed to slip unseen through the rift, even as the world was trying to block it up. The soul wandered aimlessly for a while, until it came across an infant on the verge of death and slipped inside it. That soul belonged to the person who would be named Rudeus Greyrat.

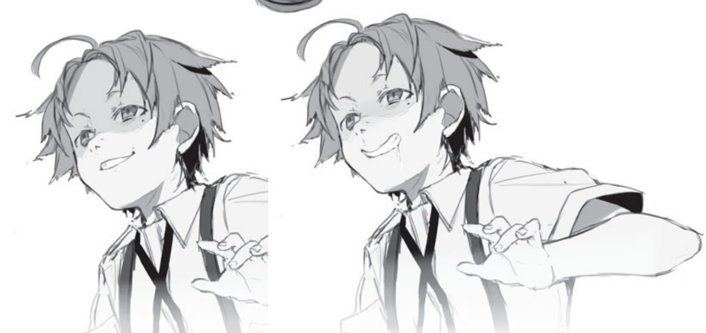
Rudeus Greyrat's existence left the smallest of alterations on the world. He changed the thinking of Roxy Migurdia, he derailed the life of Sylphiette, and he imparted knowledge to Eris Boreas Greyrat. These actions weakened the world's ability to resist, and the rift expanded outwards.

In the year 417 of the Armored Dragon Era, Nanahoshi Shizuka was summoned.

Rudeus Greyrat's existence had altered the world more than the girl had hoped for. It was only supposed to have been enough change that the boy would be saved, but it did not stop there. History branched off in an unknown direction. The world changed. It is impossible to know if these changes were those that the girl wished for, as she has not yet been born. A few years after Rudeus's death, she will be. In exchange for the loops, she will be born as an empty shell of a Blessed Child, losing all but the slightest hint of her powers. To grant her wish, she will be born into one final world. Whether she will survive to the end is a tale for another time.

A COLLECTION OF
Character Designs
FROM PAST GENERATIONS


Rudeus
Mole under left eye
7
3
5
6

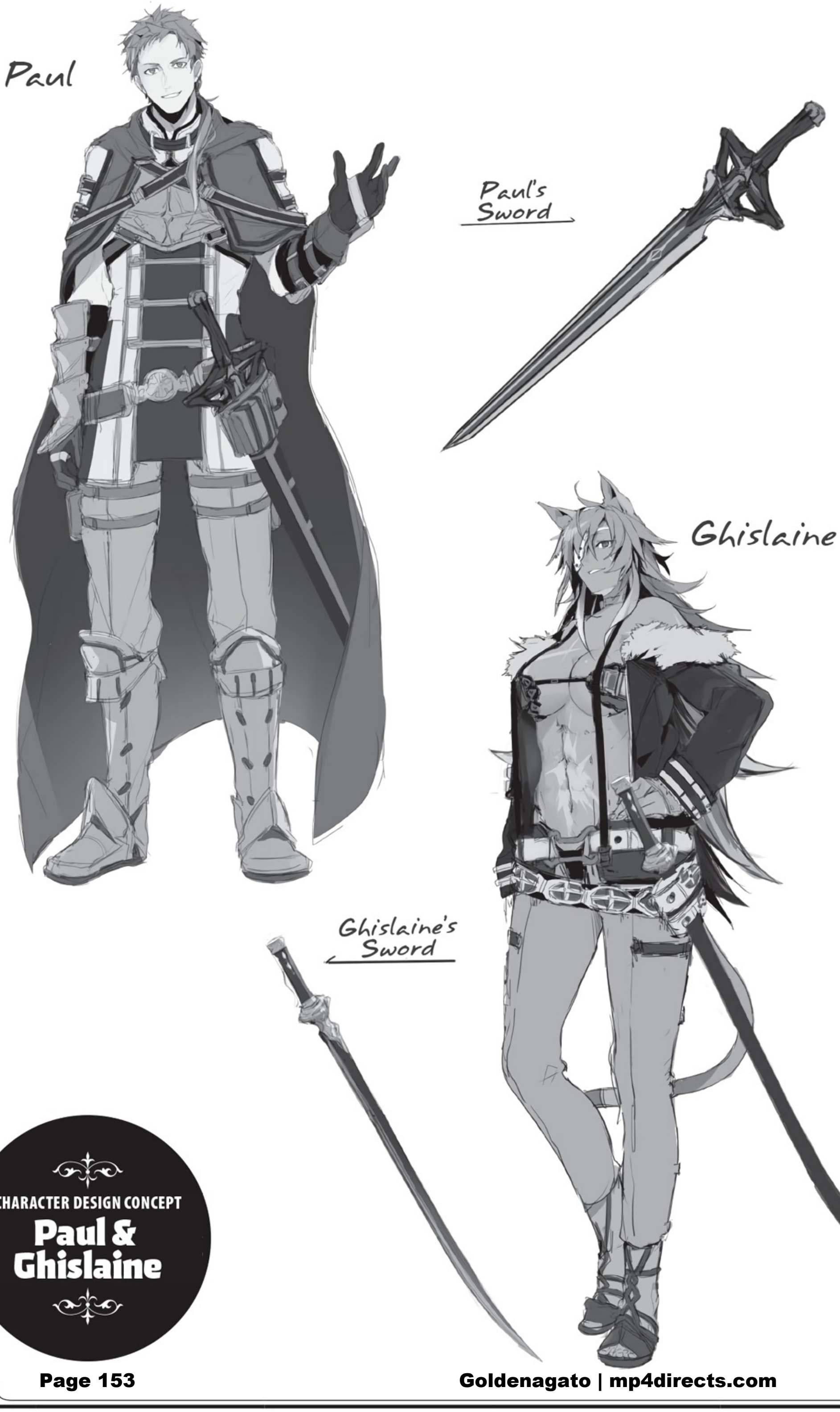


CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Rudeus

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Paul & Ghislaine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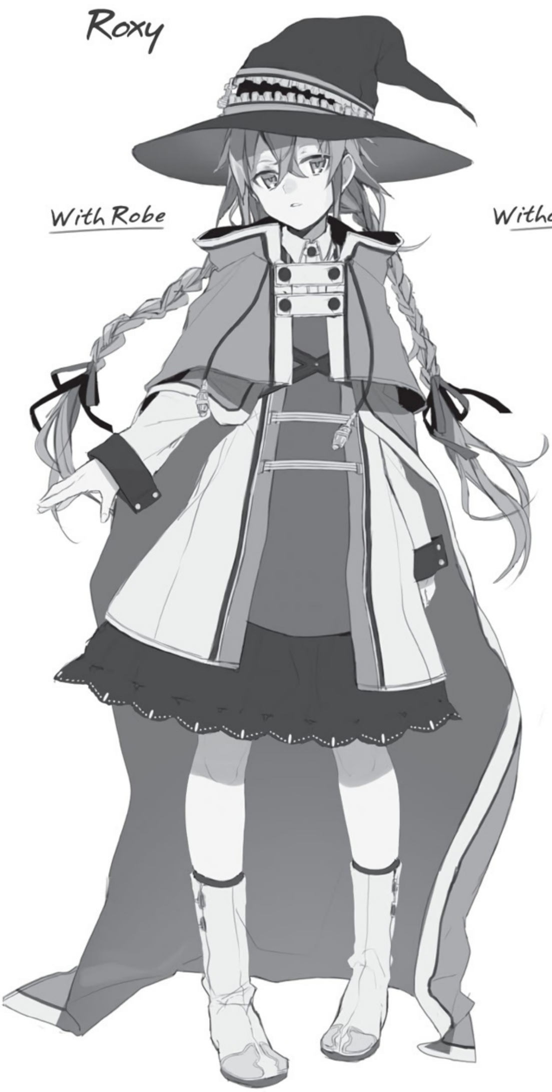
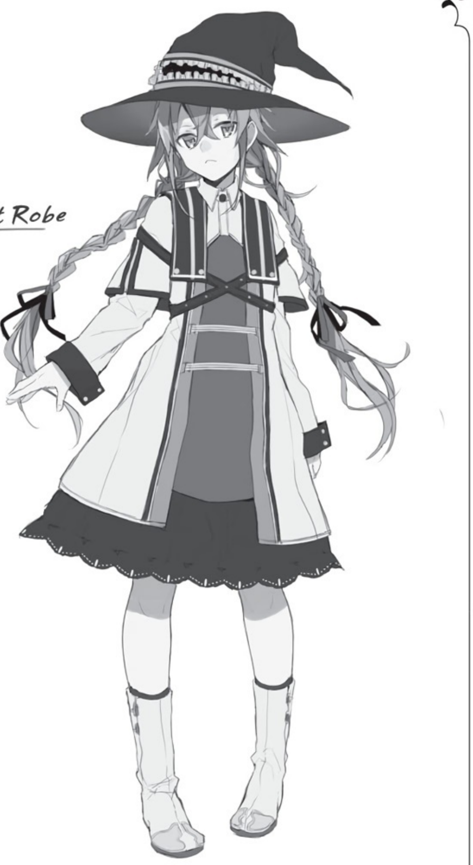
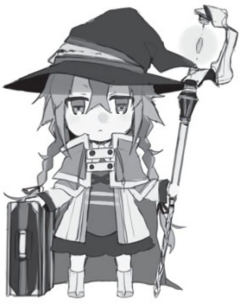
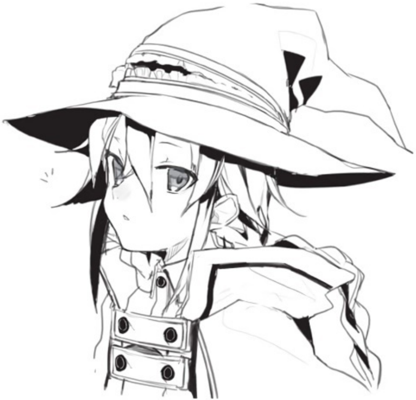
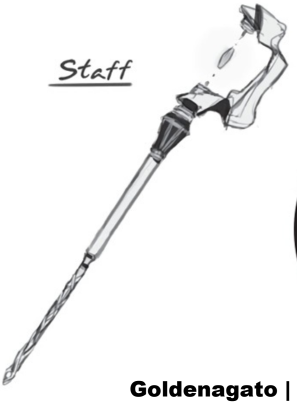
Paul's Sword
Ghislaine
Ghislaine's Sword


Roxy
With Robe


Without Robe

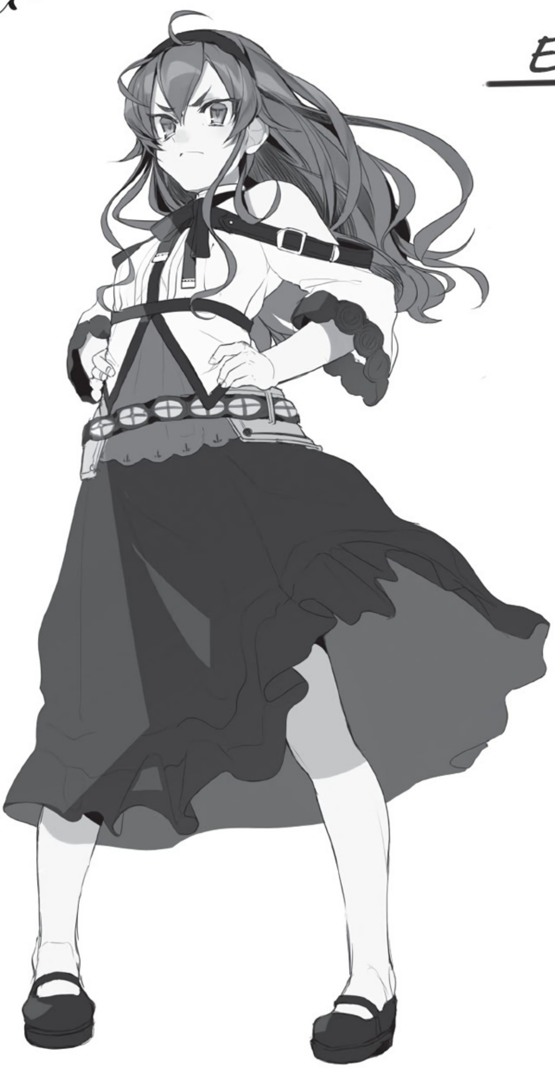


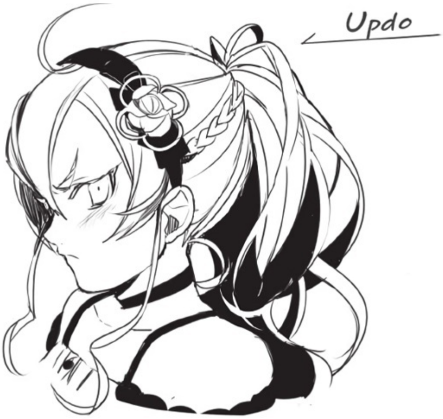




CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

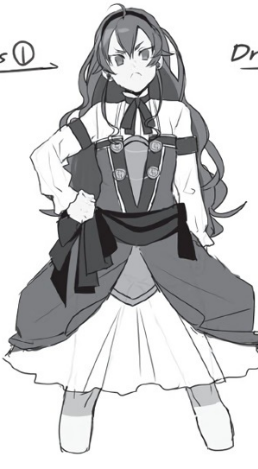
Roxy

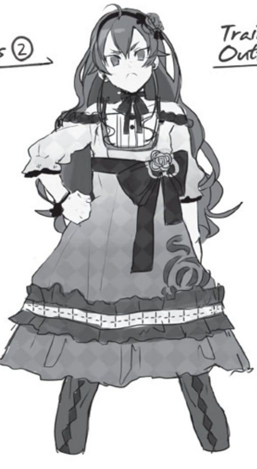


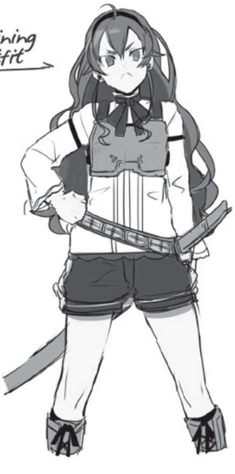


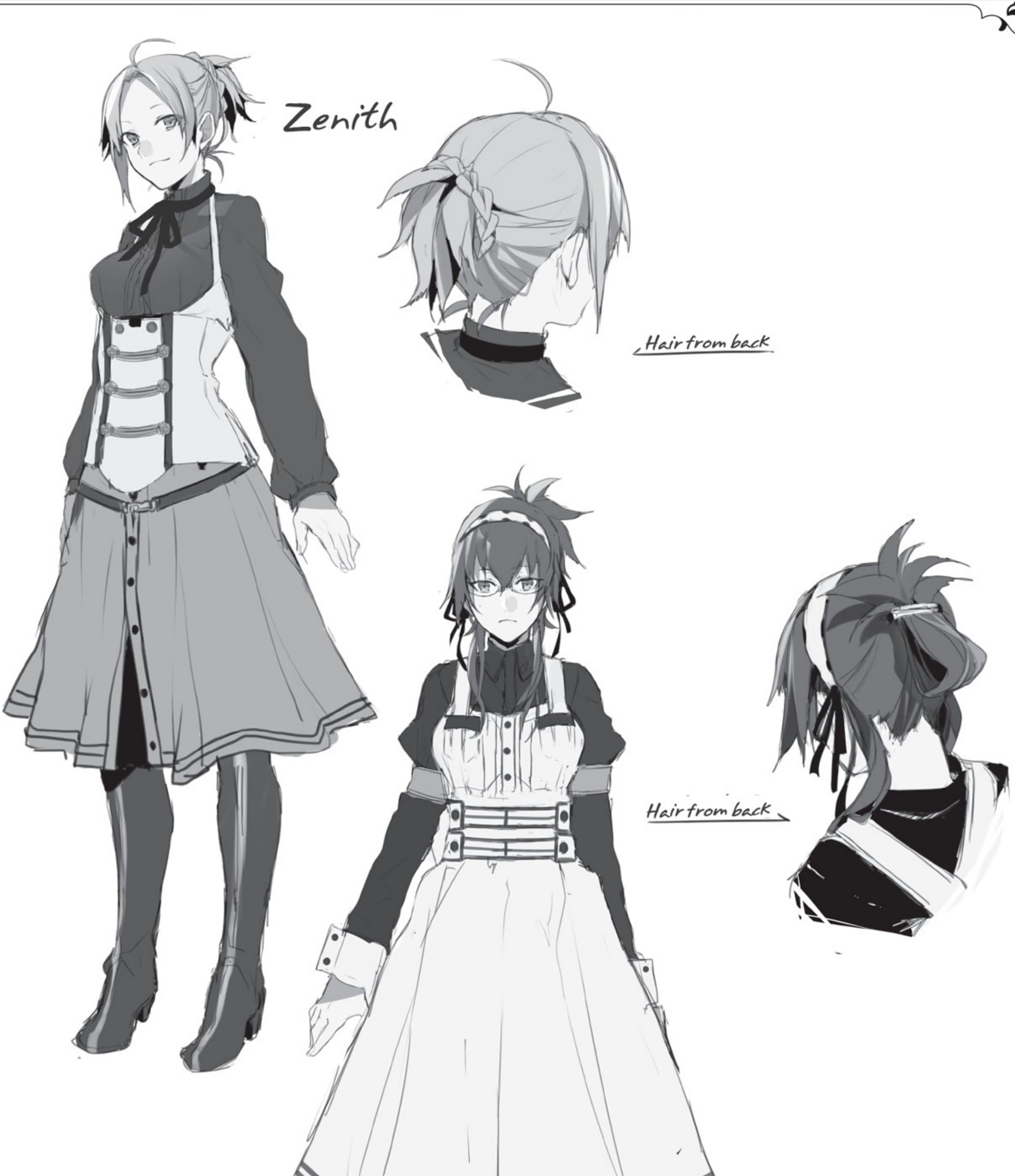
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Eris



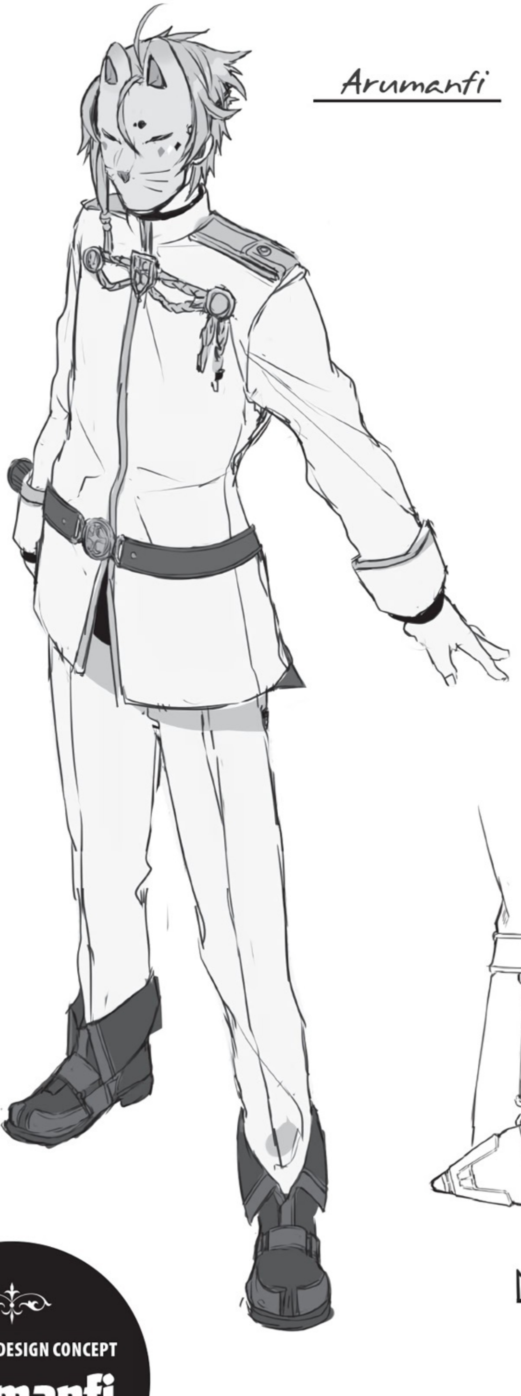


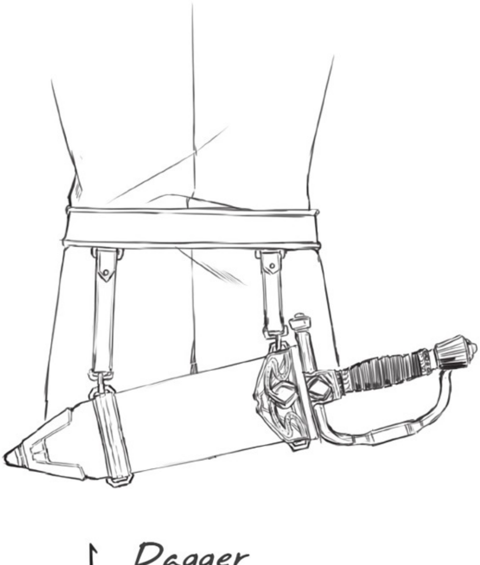

Training Outfit


Zenith
Hair from back
Hair from back
Lilia

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Zenith & Lilia



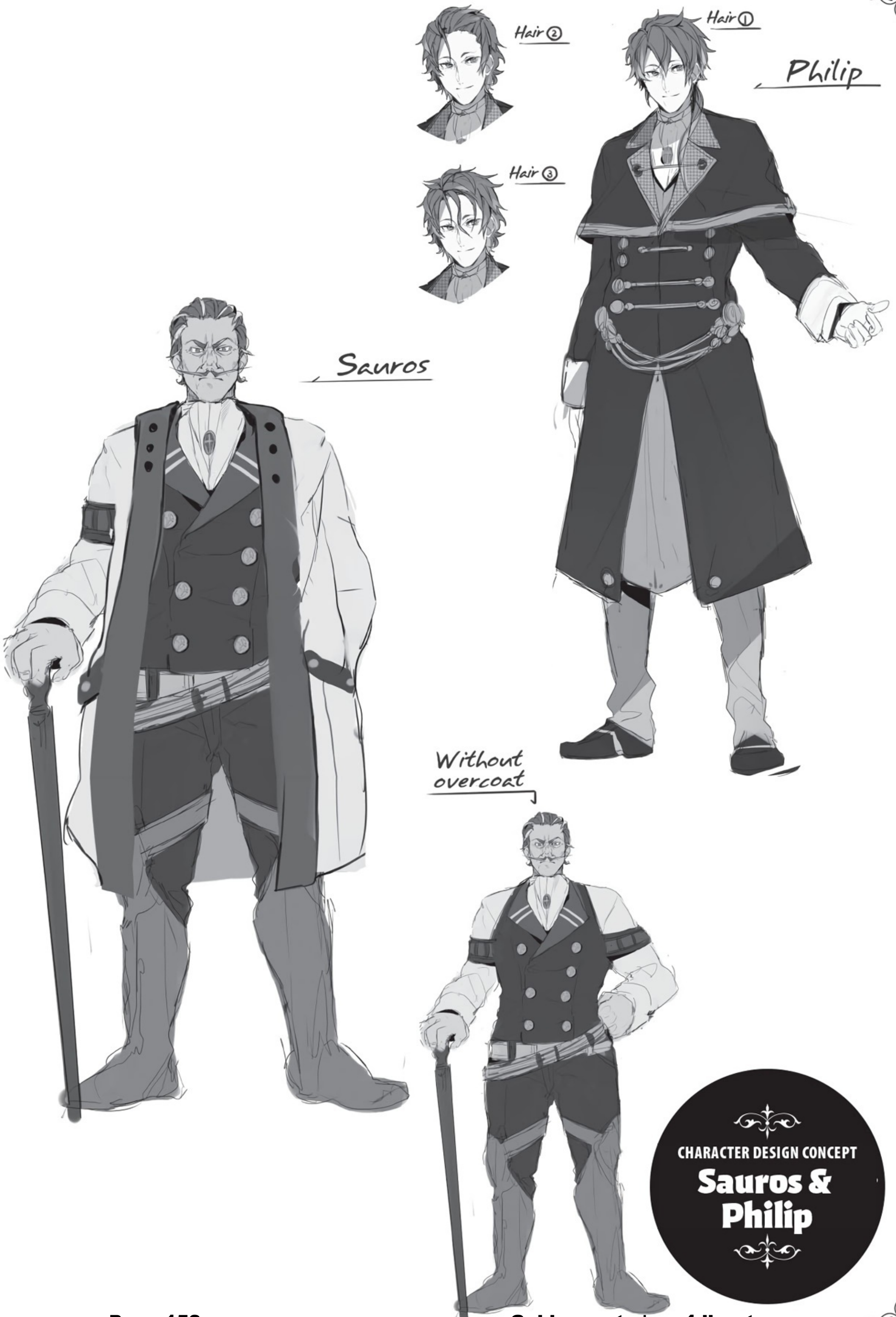


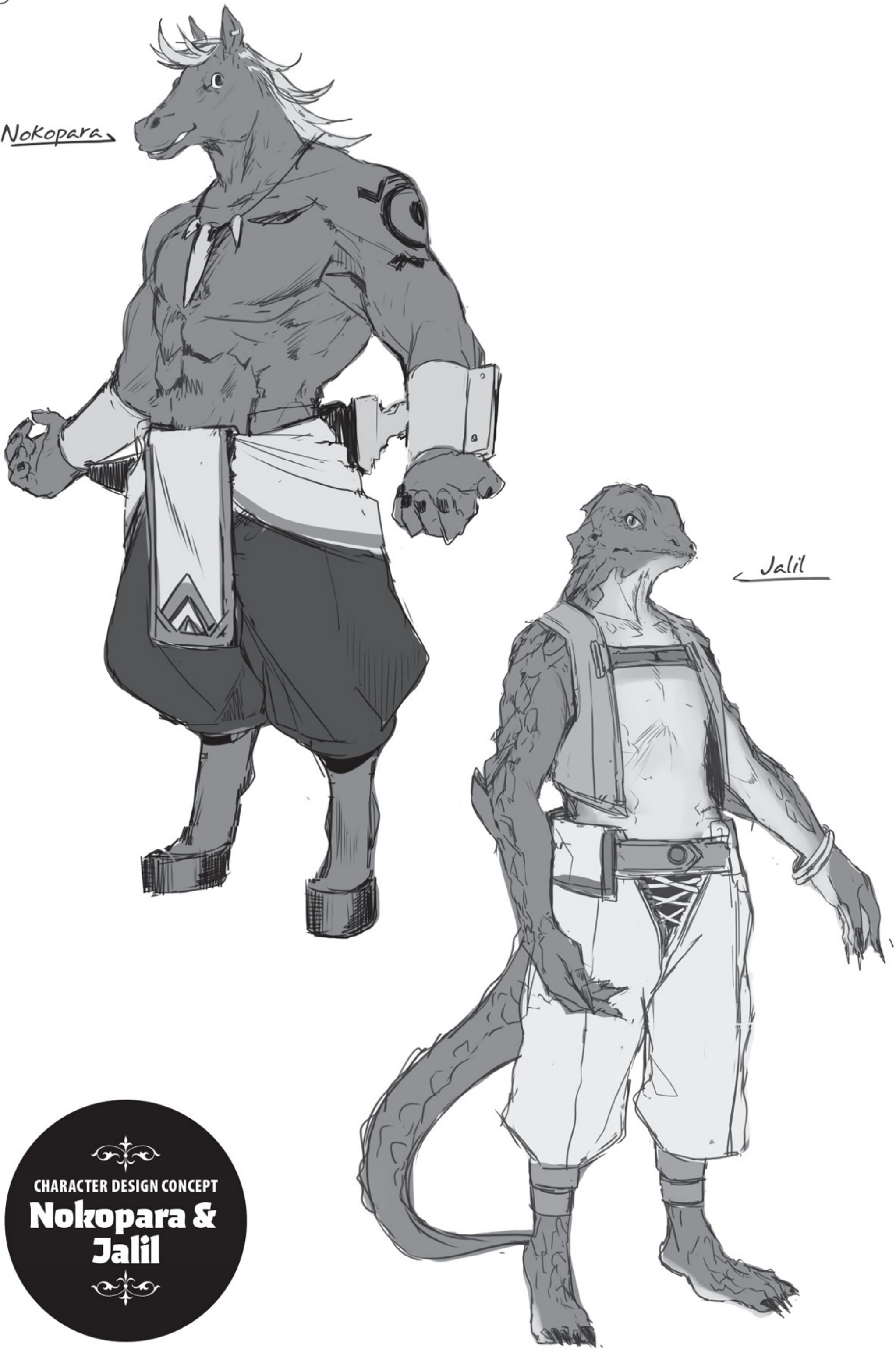
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Arumanfi

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

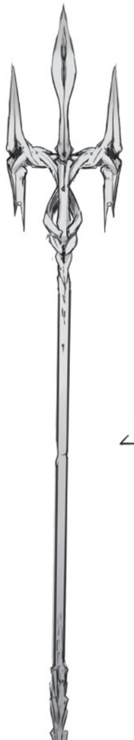
Sauros & Philip

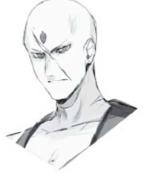

Hair ②
Hair ①
Philip
Hair ③
Sauros
Without overcoat

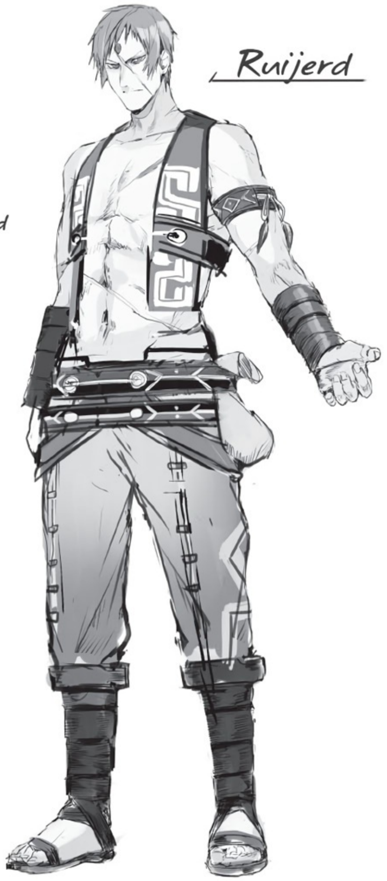

Nokopara
Jalil

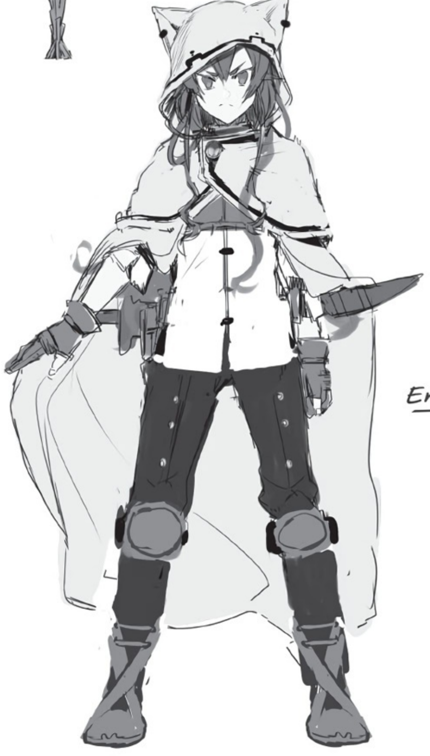
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

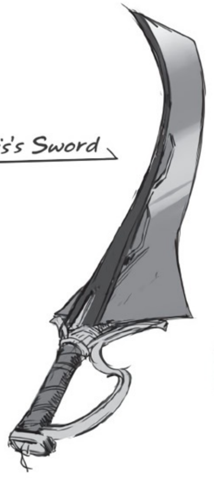
Nokopara & Jalil


White trident


Shaved head

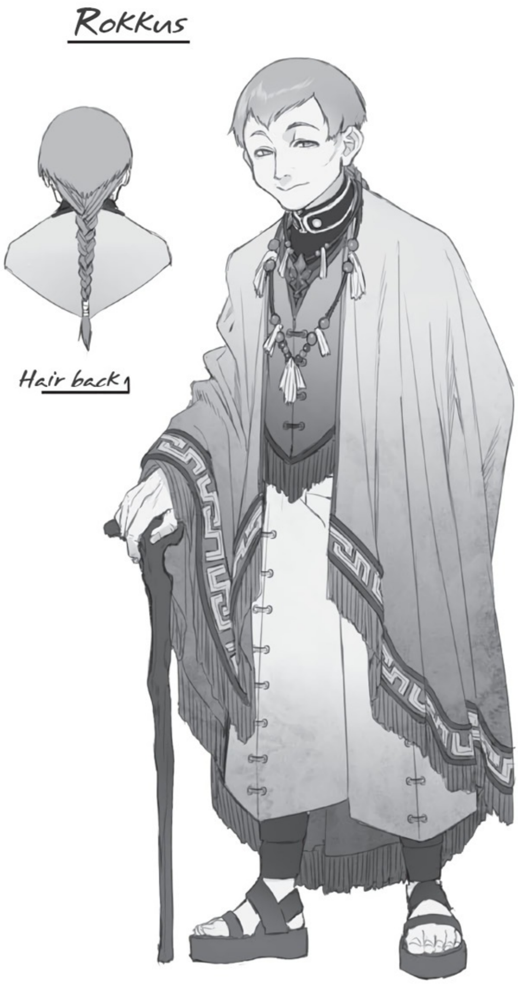





Eris's Sword

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Eris & Ruijerd

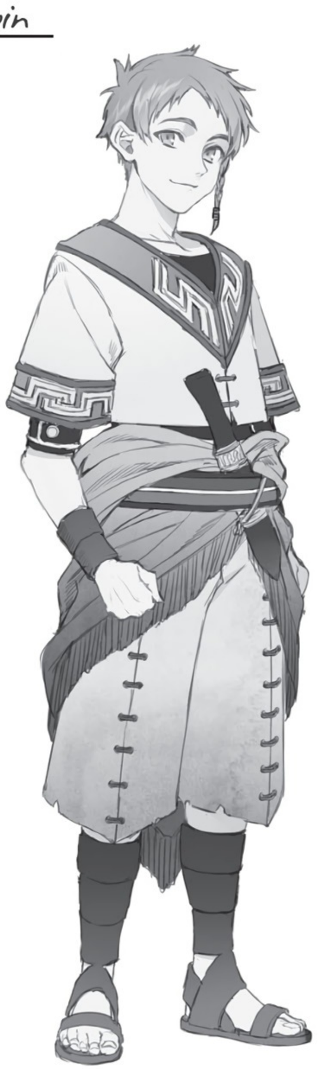

Rokkus
Hair back

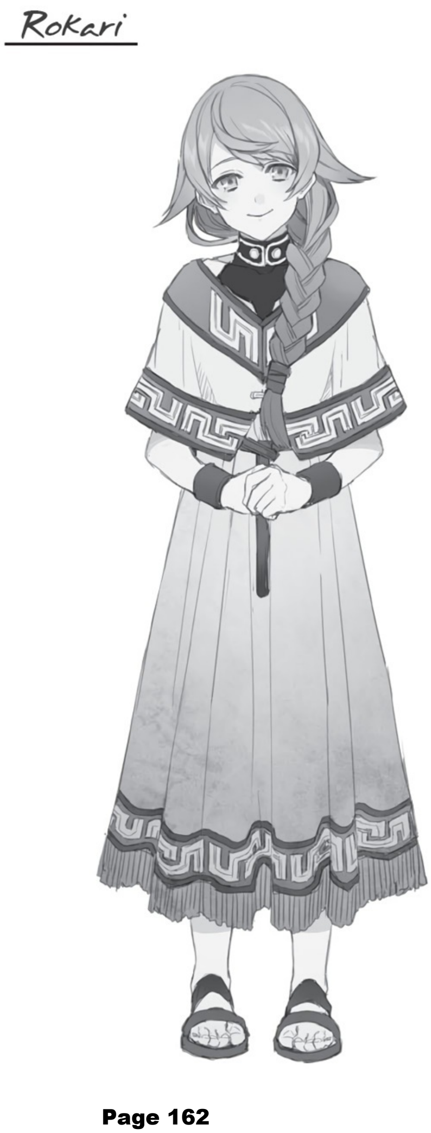
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Rokkus

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

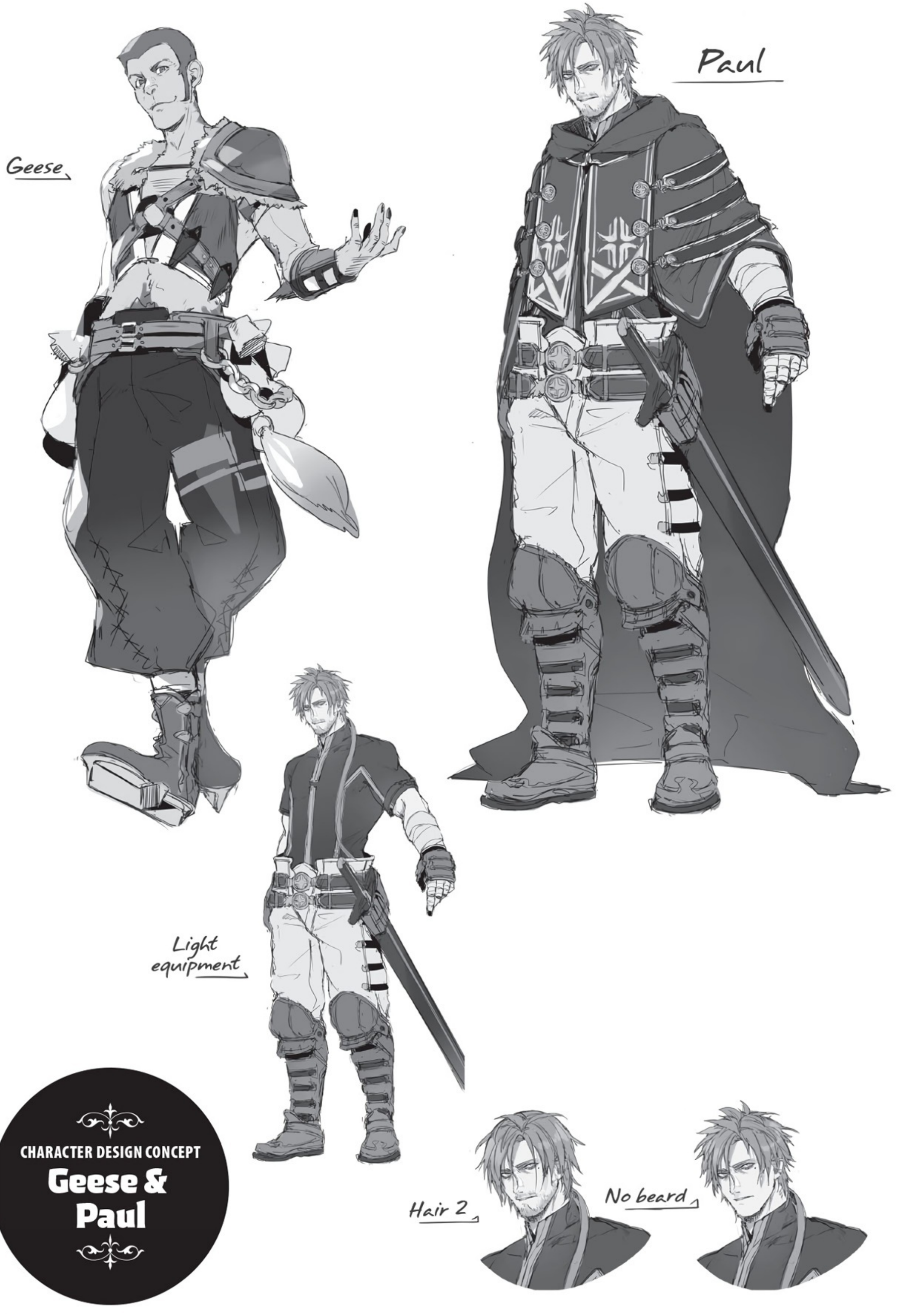
Rokari & Rowin

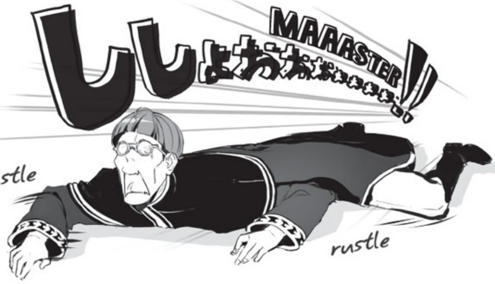


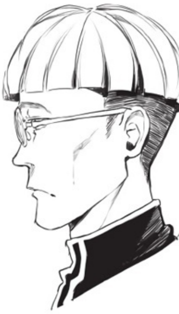


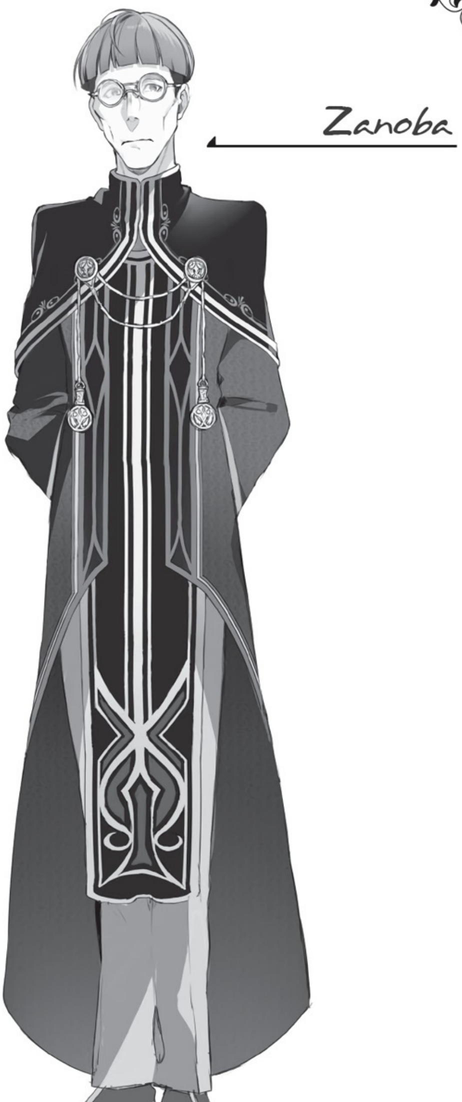
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

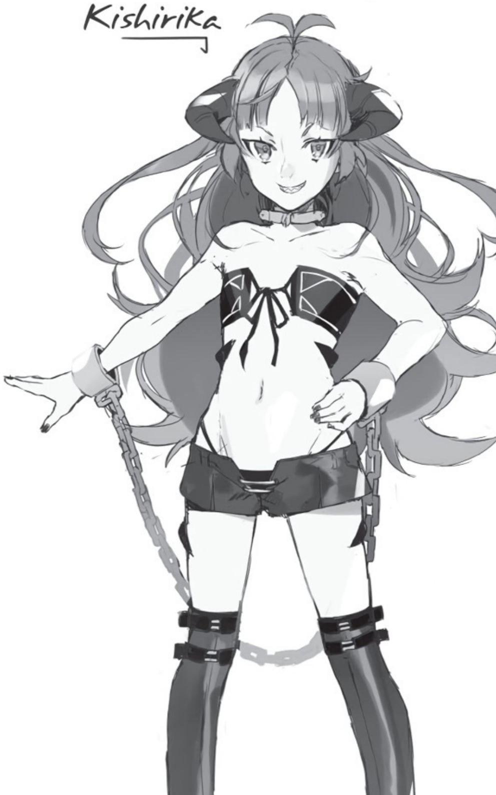
Geese & Paul


Geese
Paul
Light equipment
Hair 2
No beard


ししょおおぉぉぉぉぉ!!
MAAASTER!!
rustle
rustle





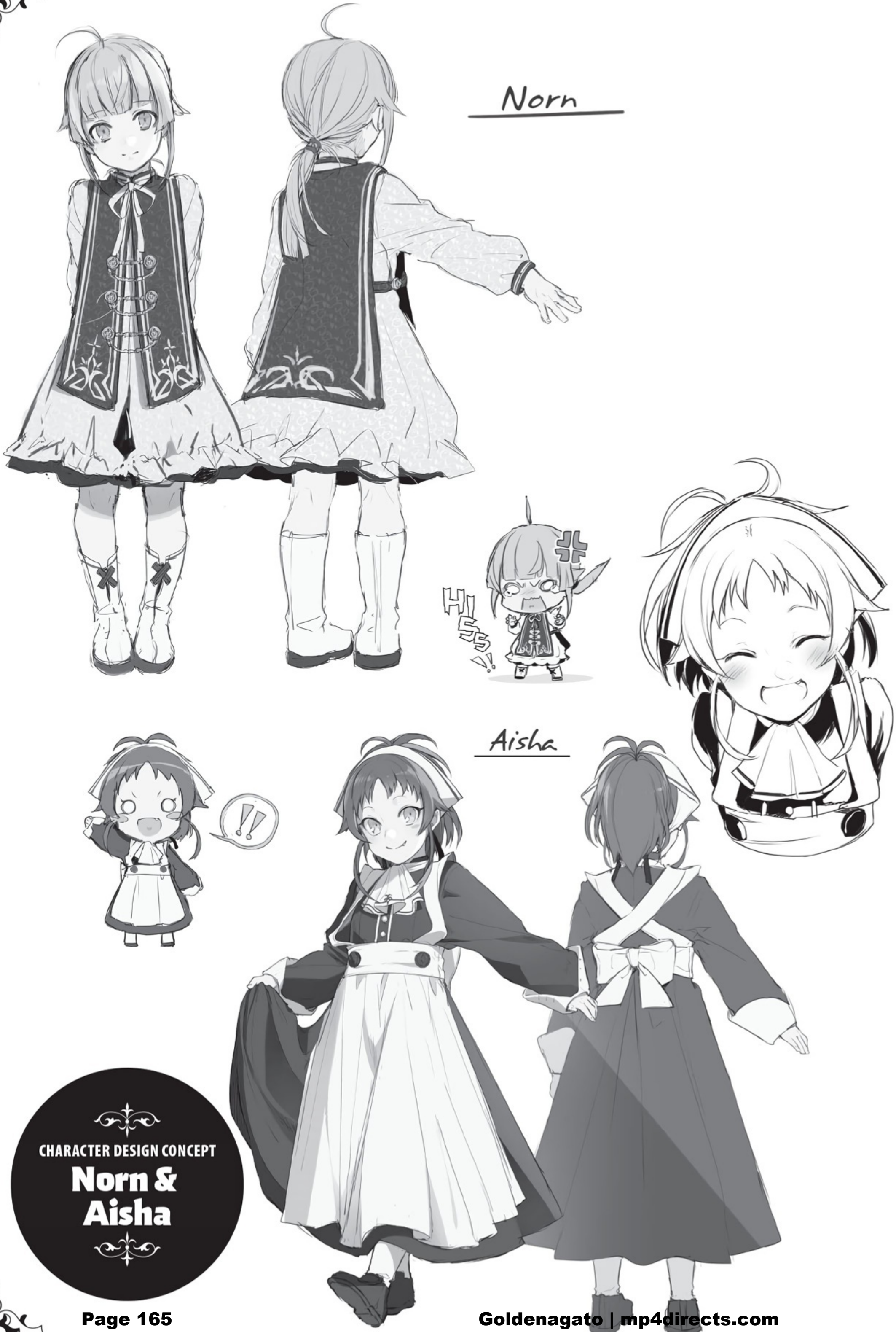


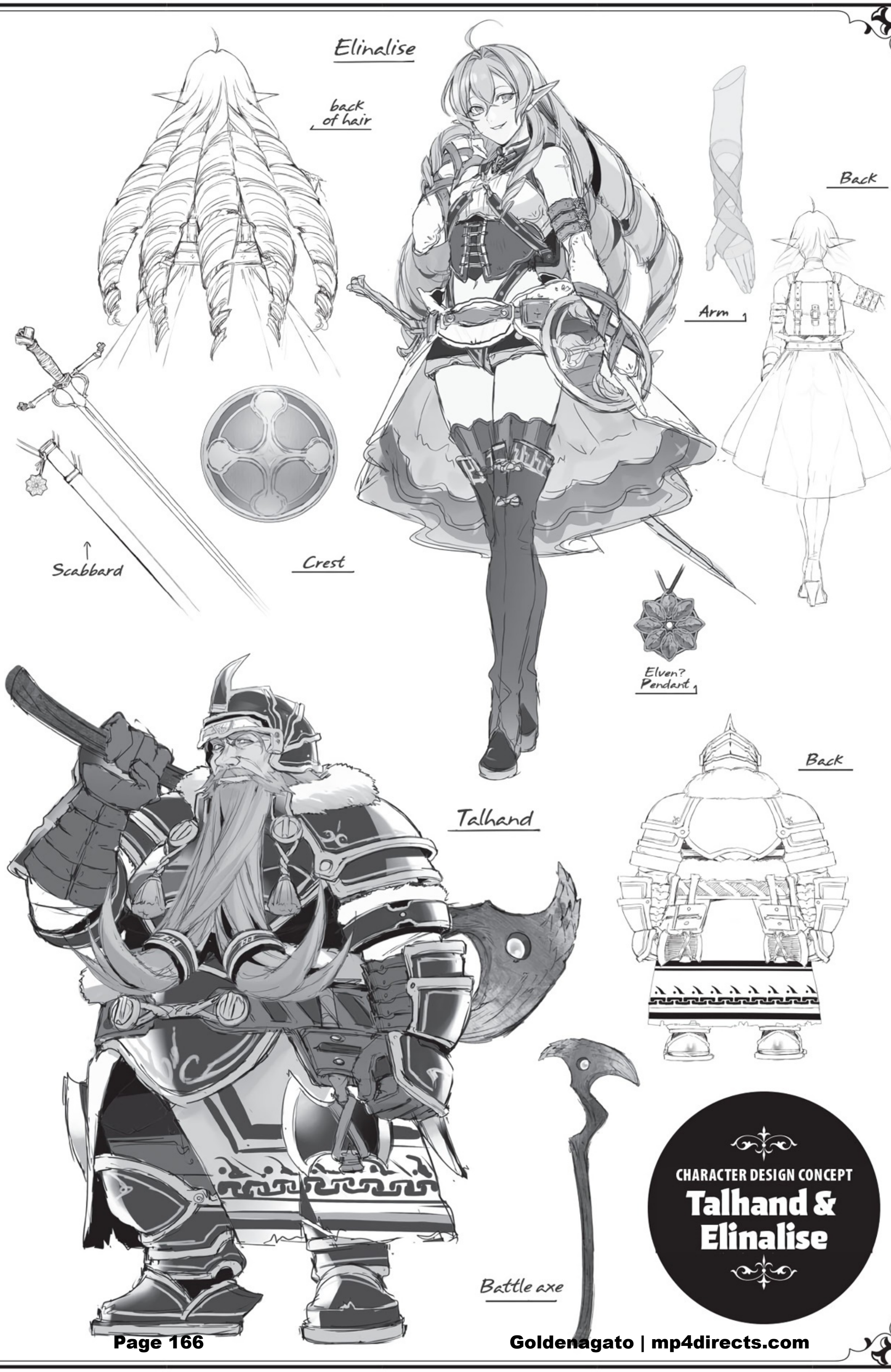
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Zanoba & Kishirika

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Norn & Aisha


Norn
HISS!!
Aisha
!!

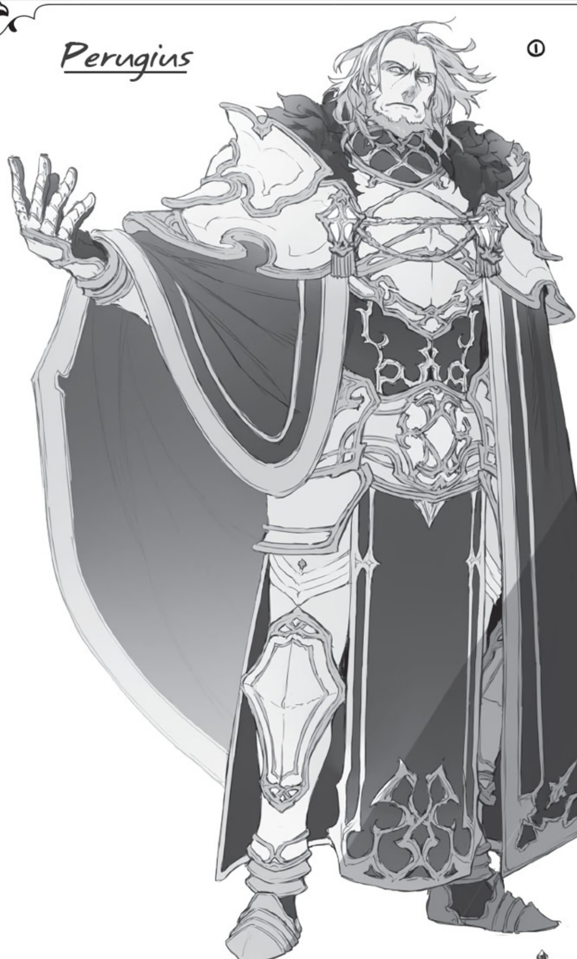

Elinalise
back of hair
Arm
Back
Scabbard
Crest
Elven? Pendant
Talhand
Back
Battle axe

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

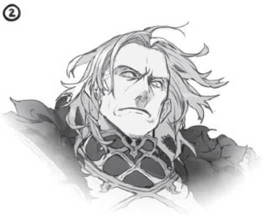
Talhand & Elinalise

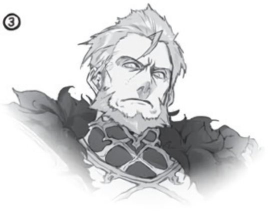
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

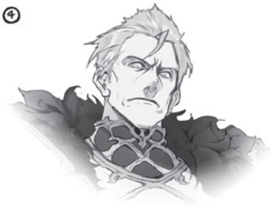
Perugius & Sylvaril



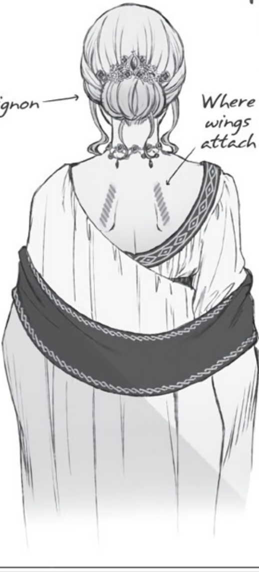
Hairstyle alternatives

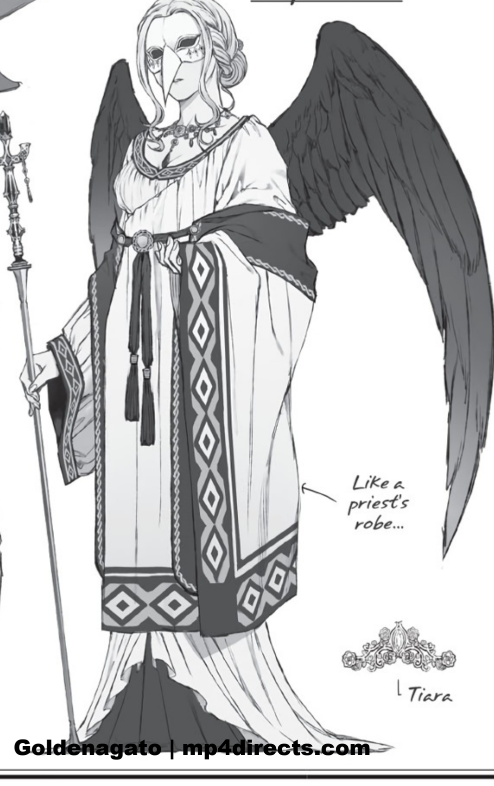






Sylvaril

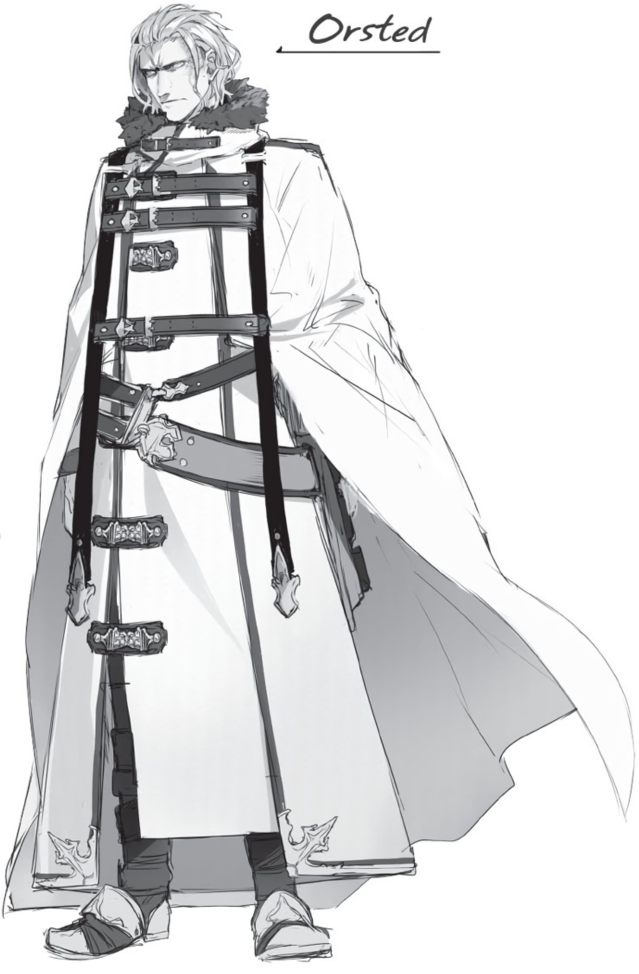

Back
Chignon
Where wings attach

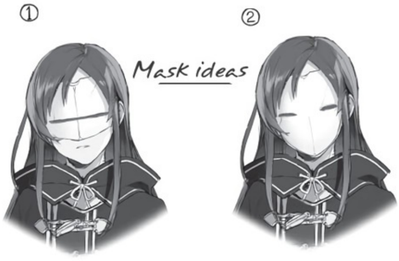

Like a priest's robe...

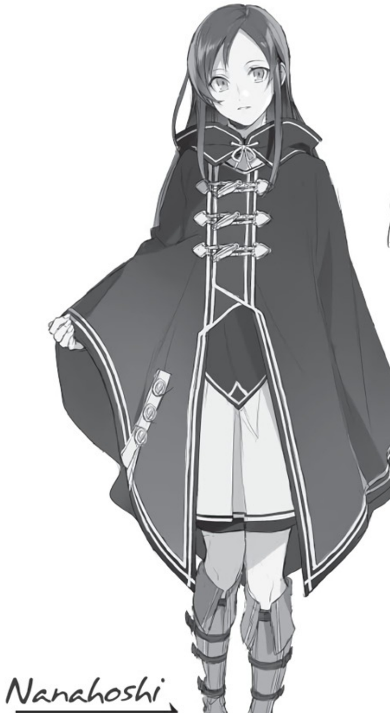
Tiara

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Nanahoshi & Orsted

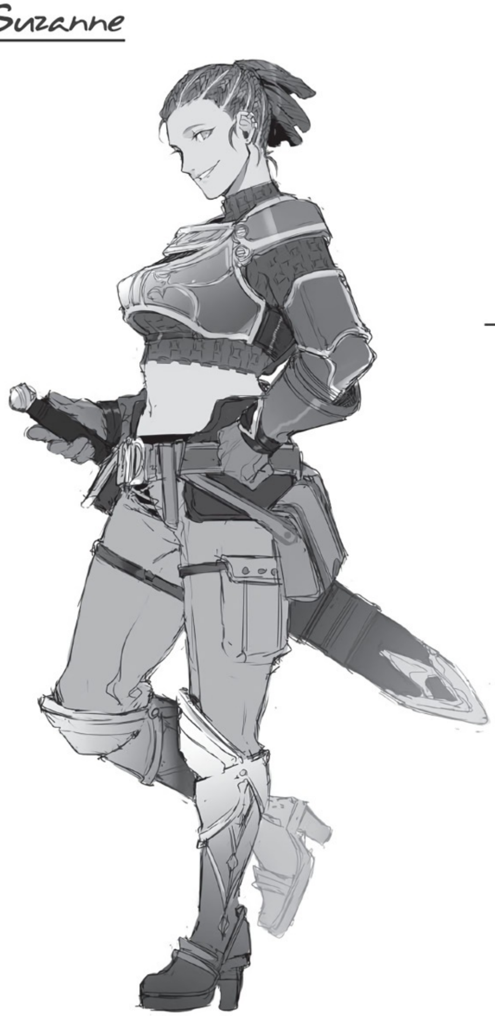


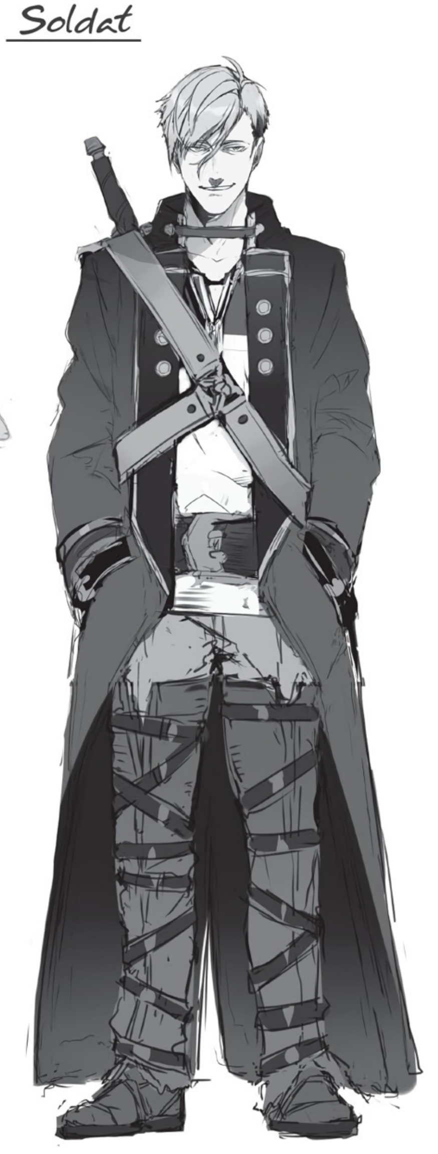

①
Mask ideas
②



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

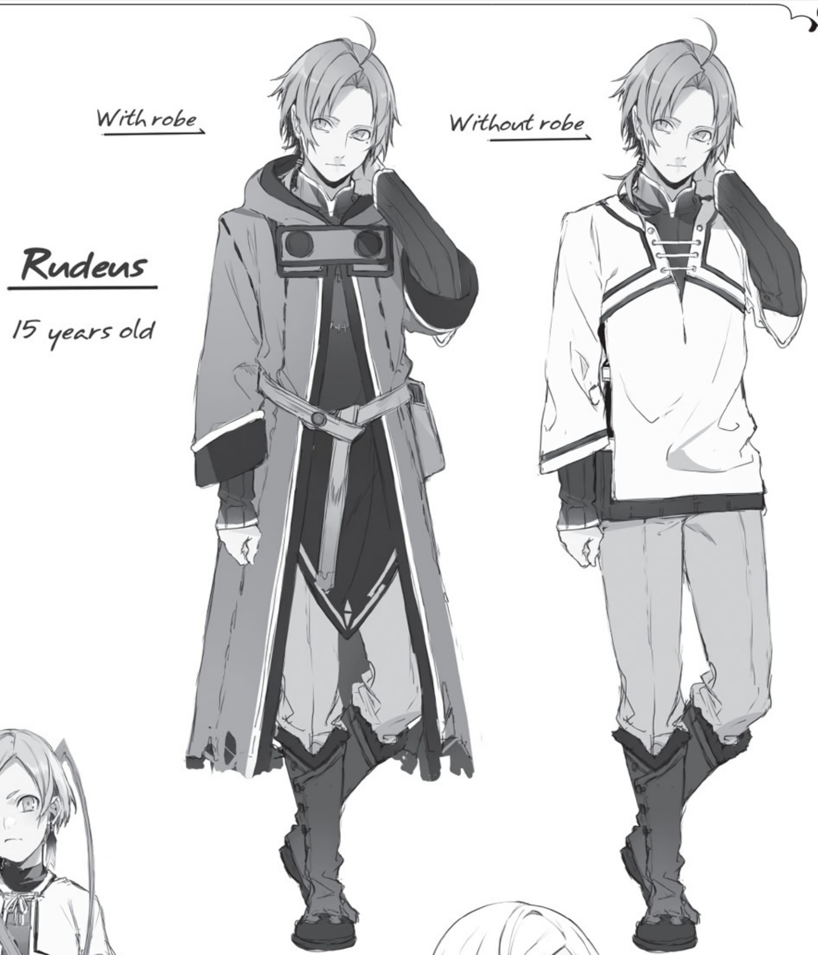
Suzanne & Soldat

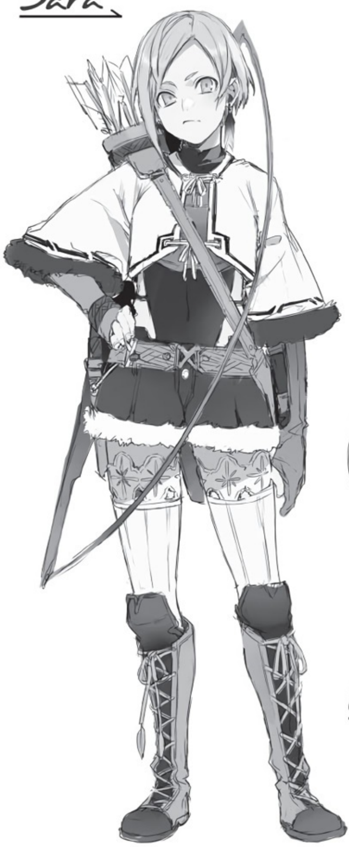


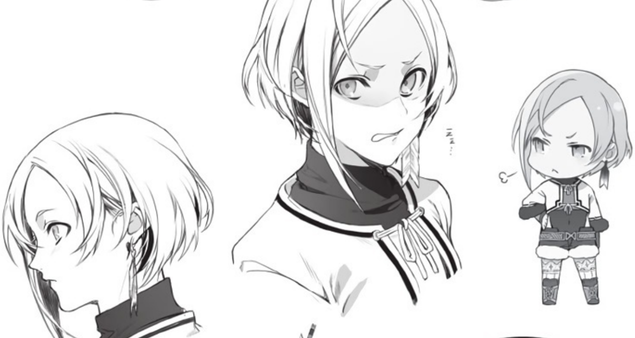


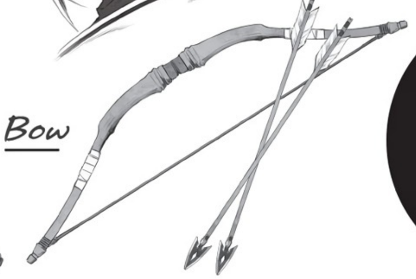
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Sara & Rudeus


With robe
Without robe
Rudeus
15 years old

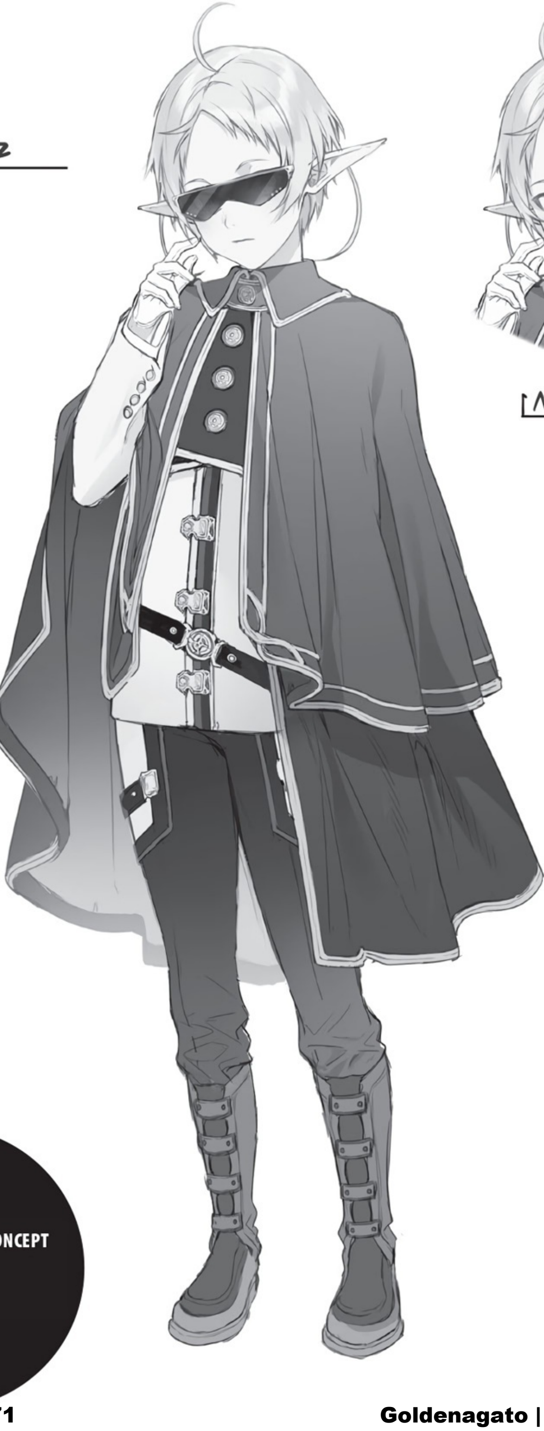




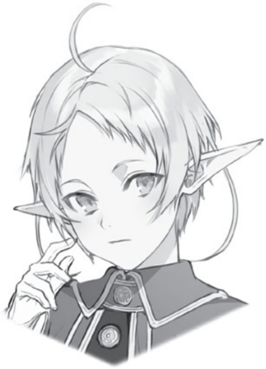


CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

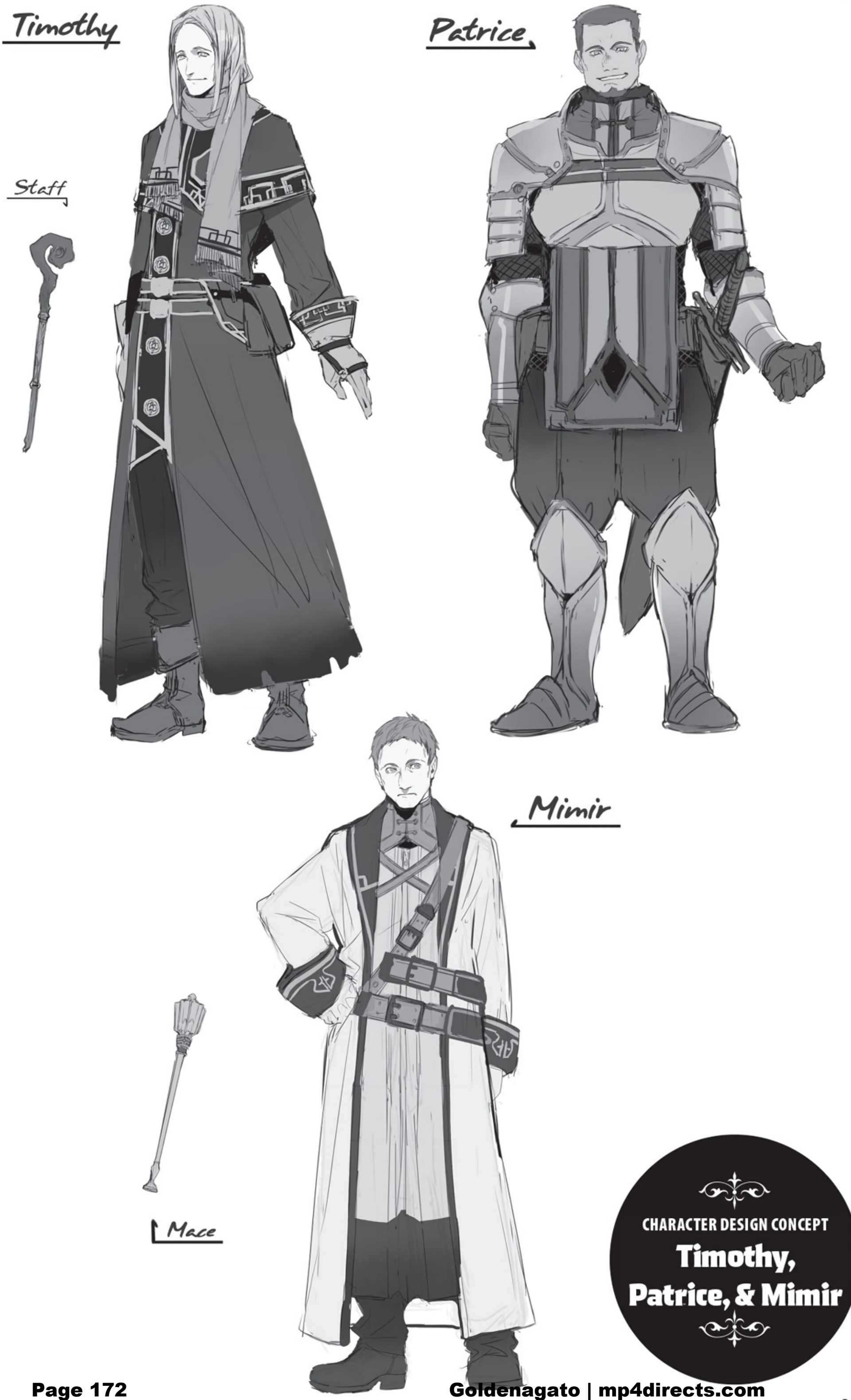
Fitz



Fitz



No sunglasses

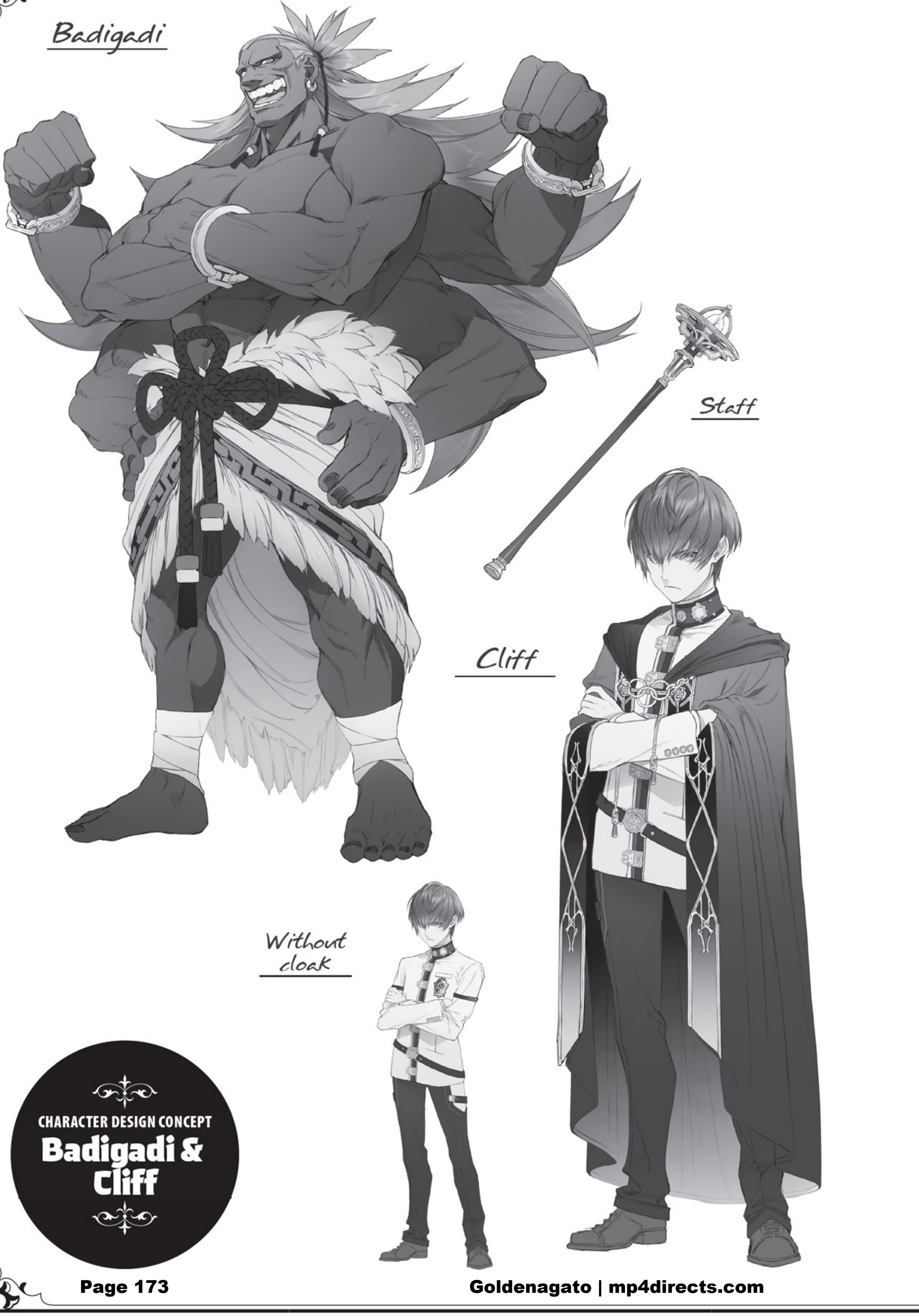

Timothy
Staff
Patrice
Mimir
Mace

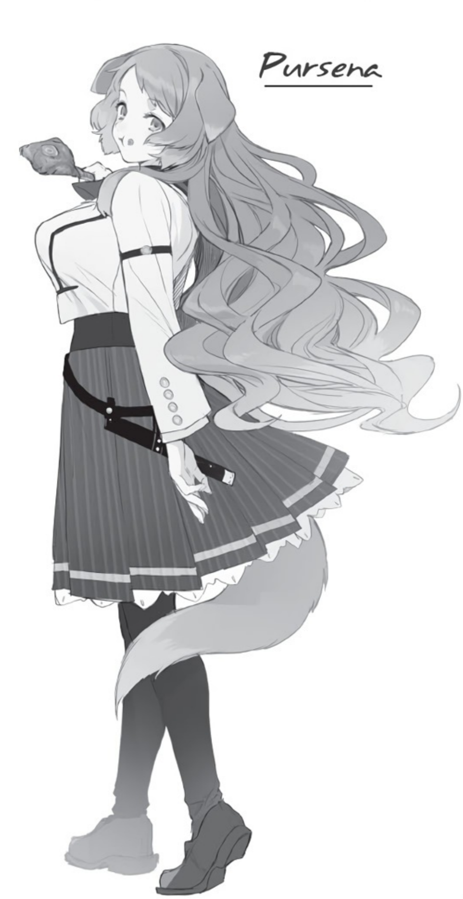
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

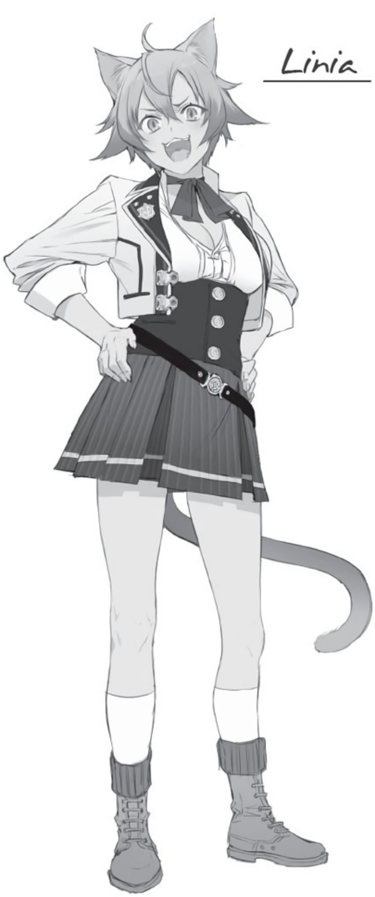
Timothy, Patrice, & Mimir

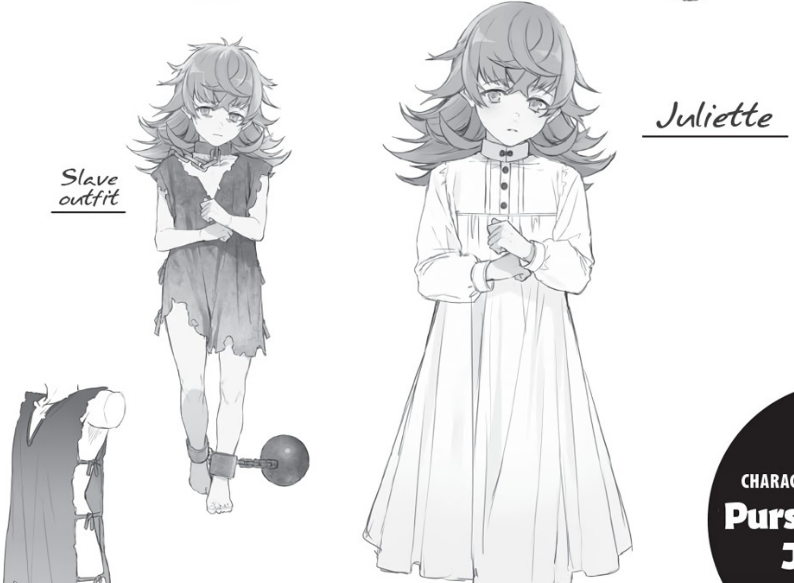
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Badigadi & Cliff


Badigadi
Staff
Cliff
Without cloak

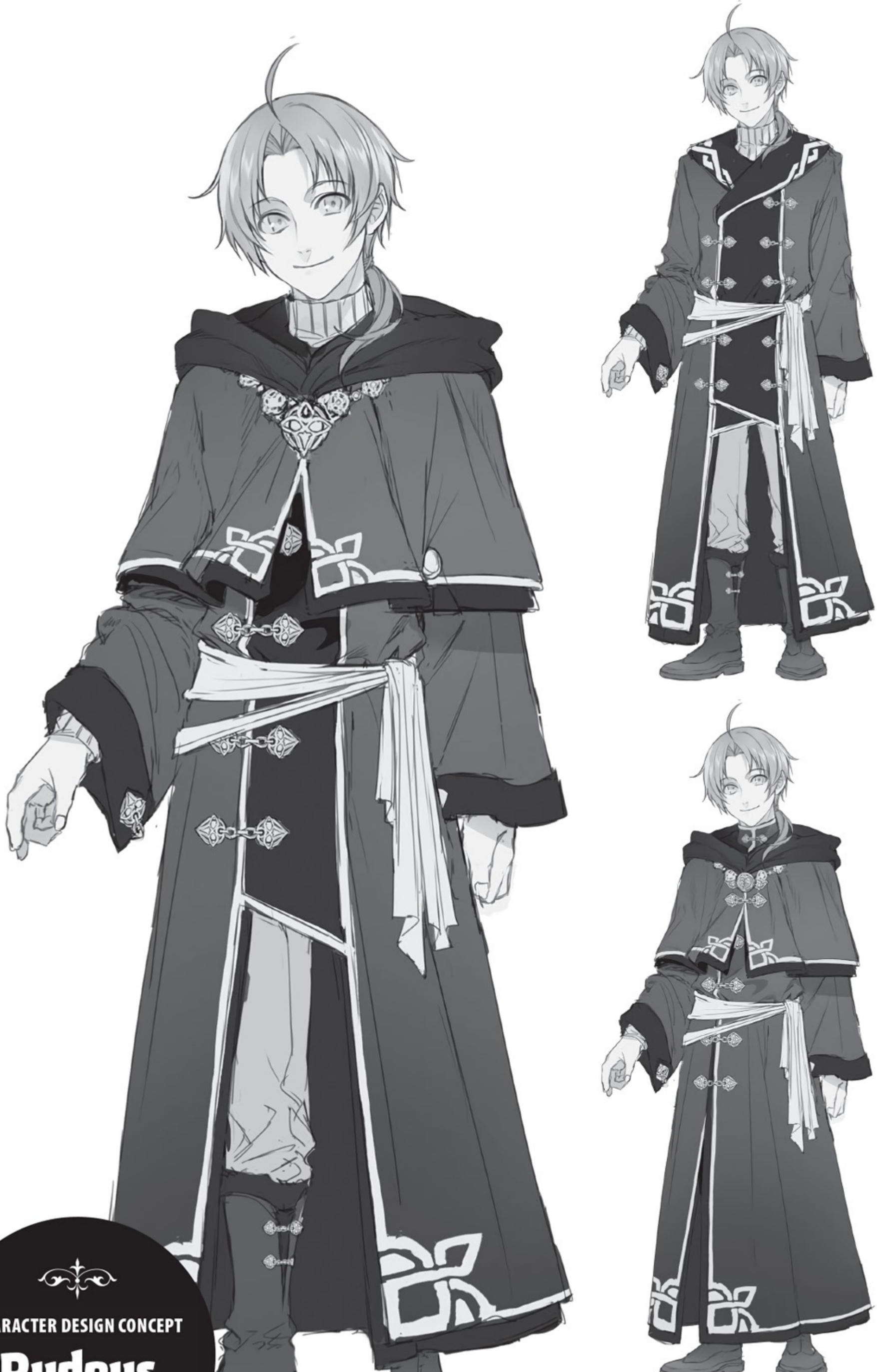





Juliette
Slave outfit
Side

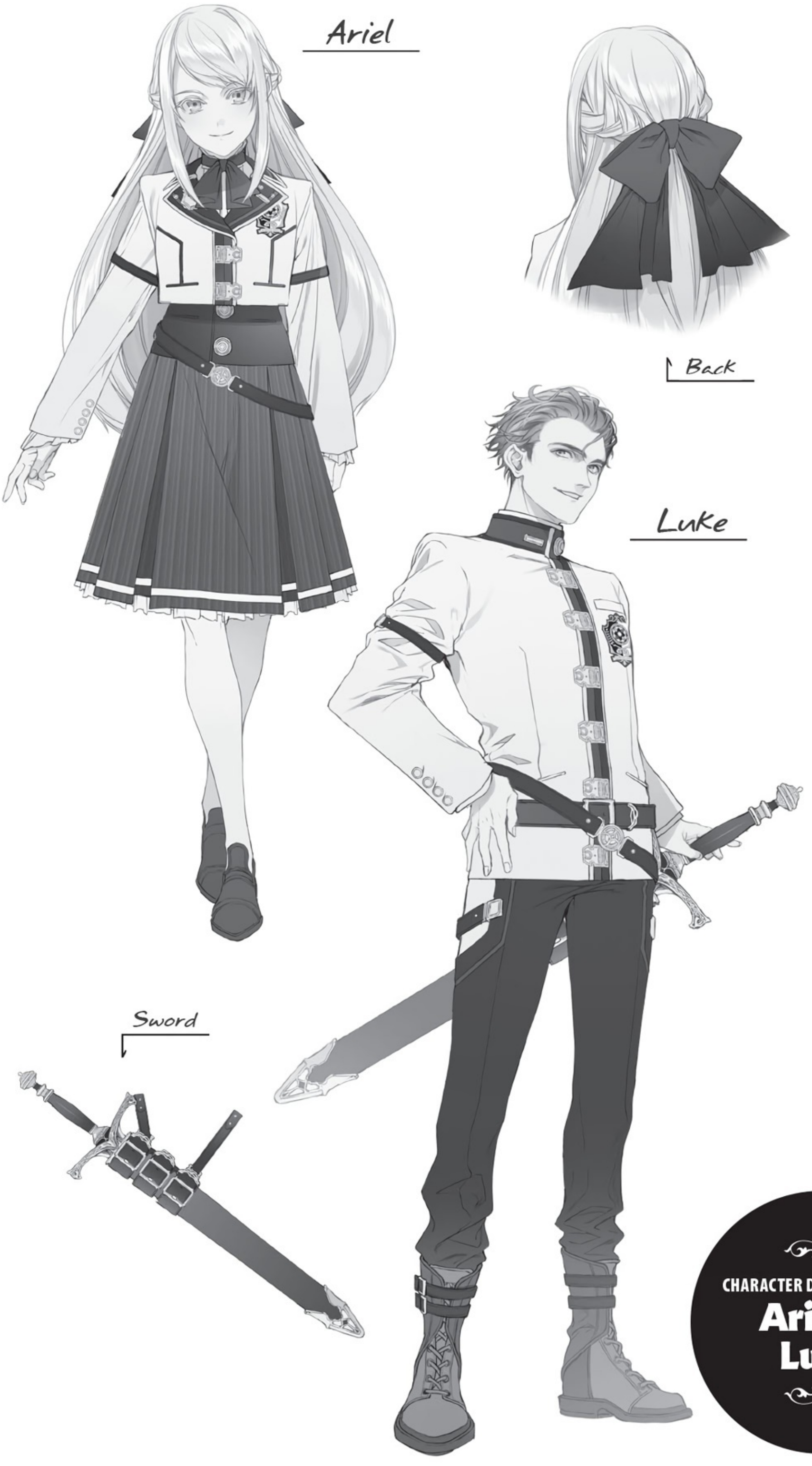
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Pursena, Linia, Juliette



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

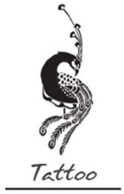
Rudeus

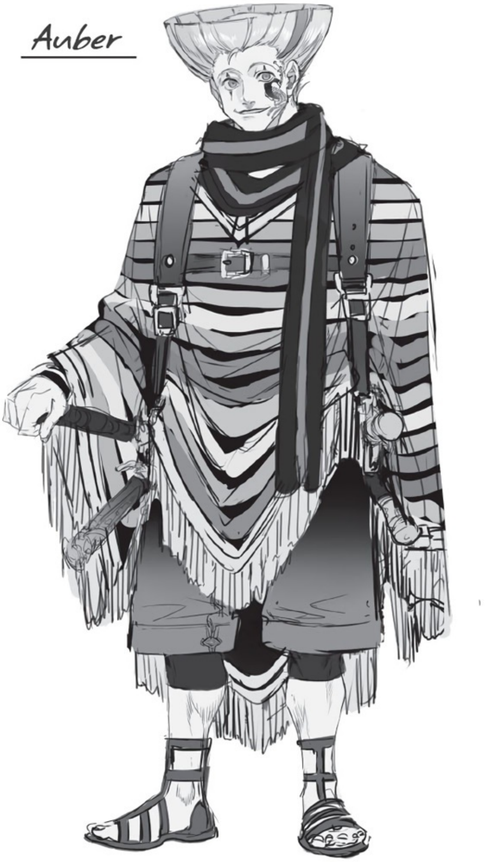

Ariel
Back
Luke
Sword

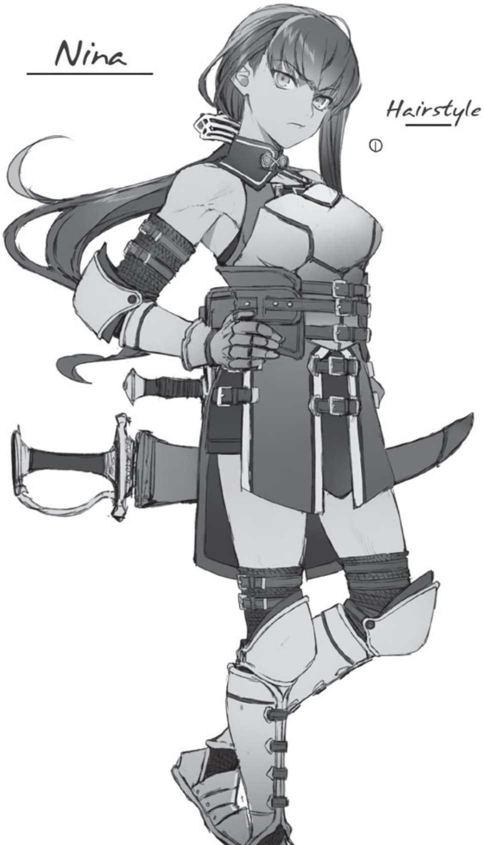
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Ariel & Luke

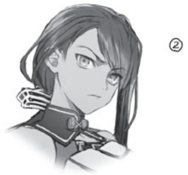
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

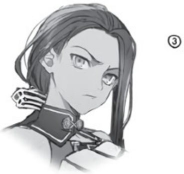
Nina & Auber

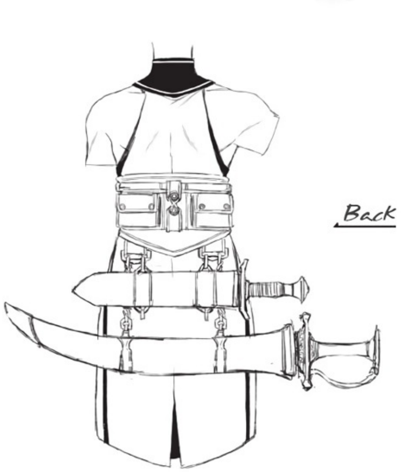


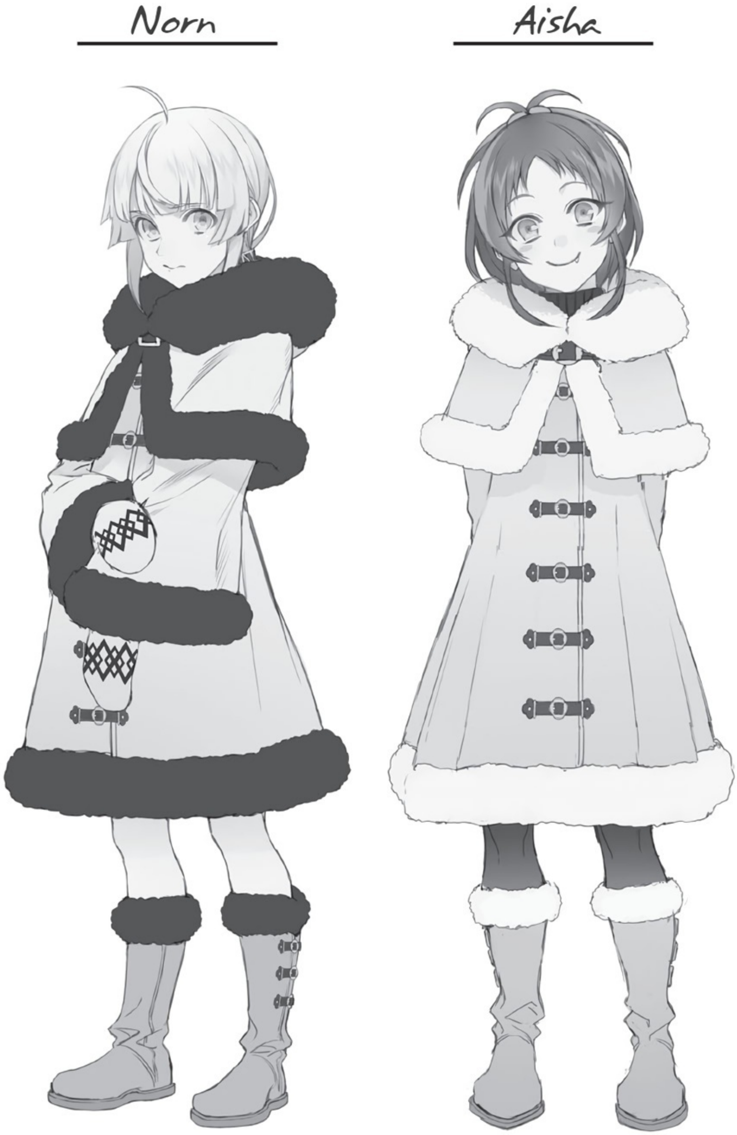


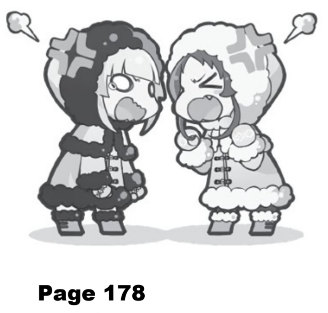

Nina
Hairstyle
①

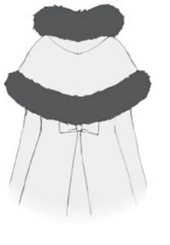


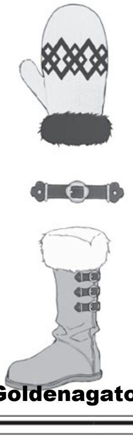






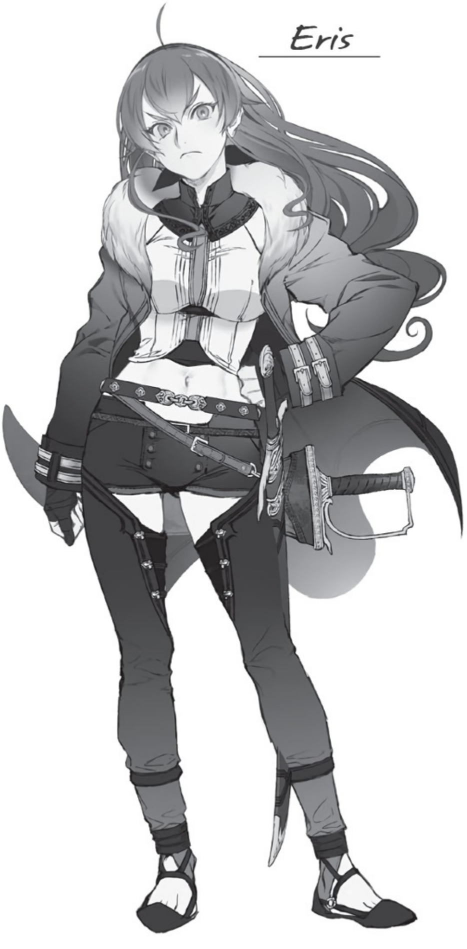


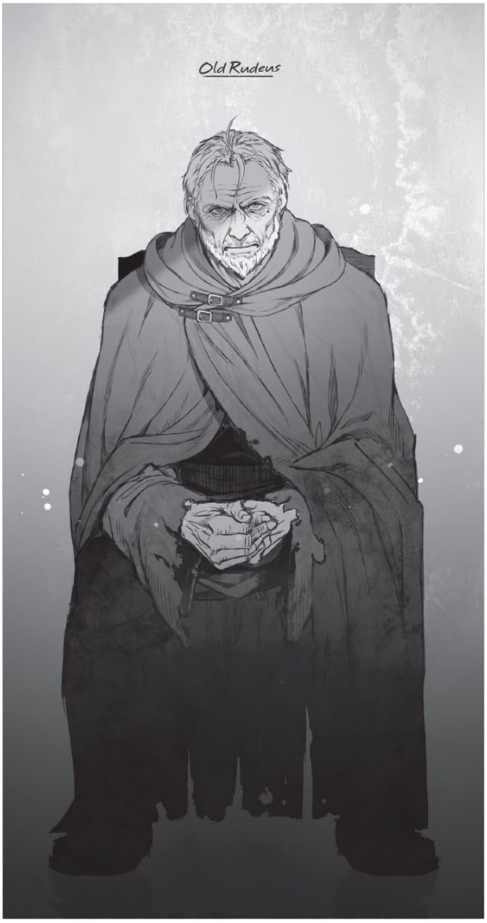


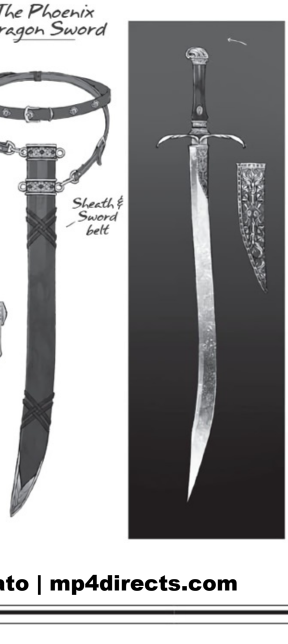


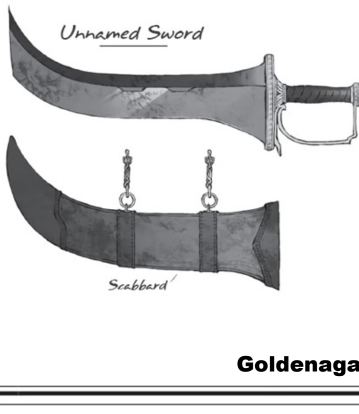
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Norn & Aisha



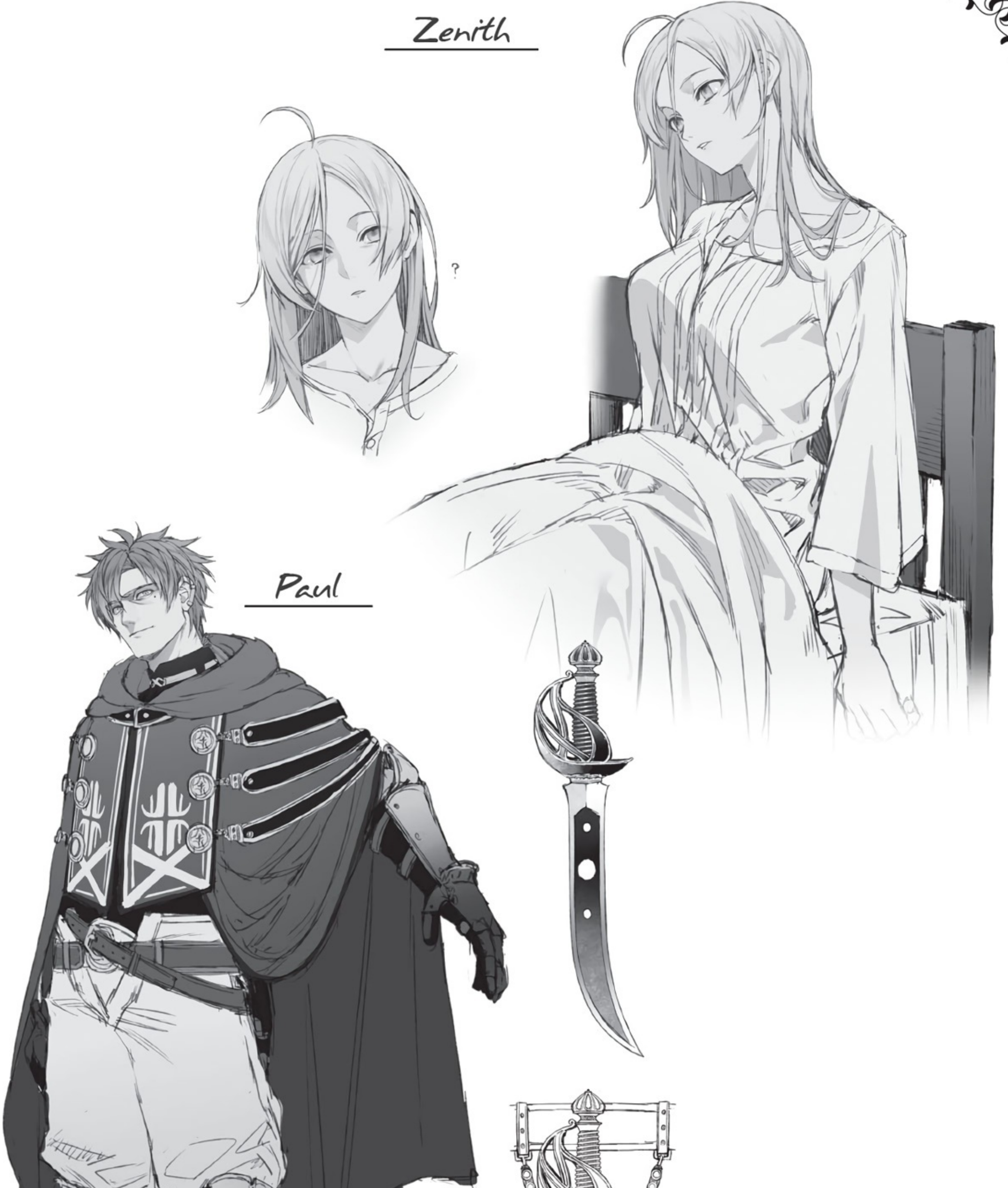



The Phoenix Dragon Sword
Sheath & Sword belt


Unnamed Sword
Scabbard

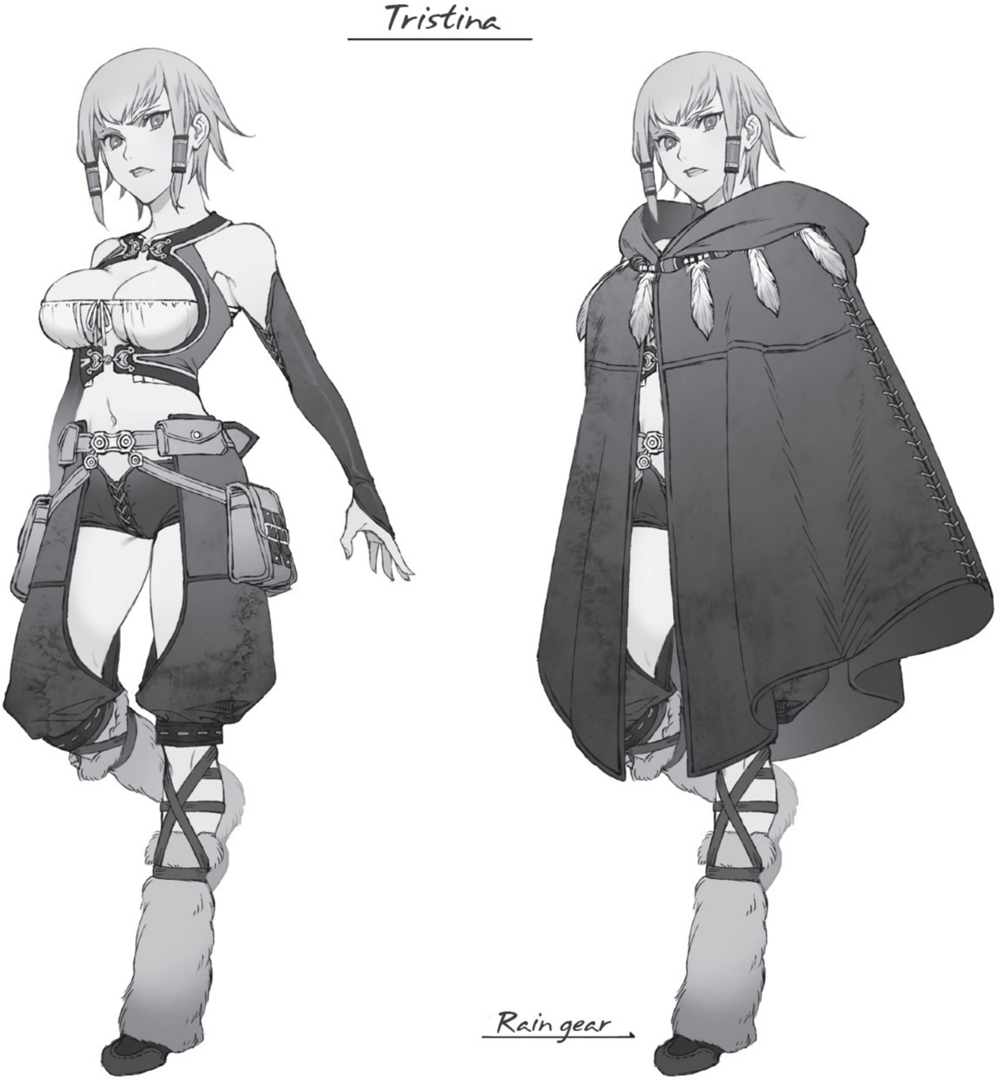
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Eris & Old Rudeus


Zenith
?
Paul
Left Sword

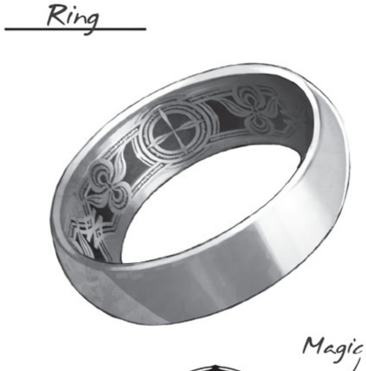
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

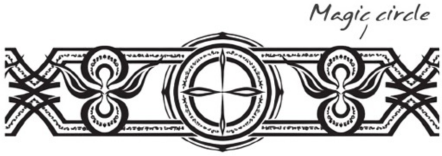
Paul & Zenith

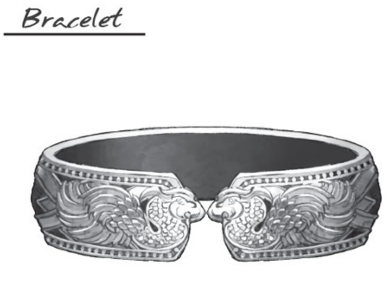

Tristina
Rain gear

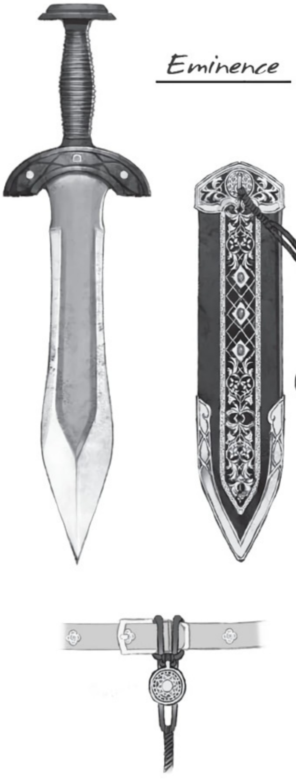
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

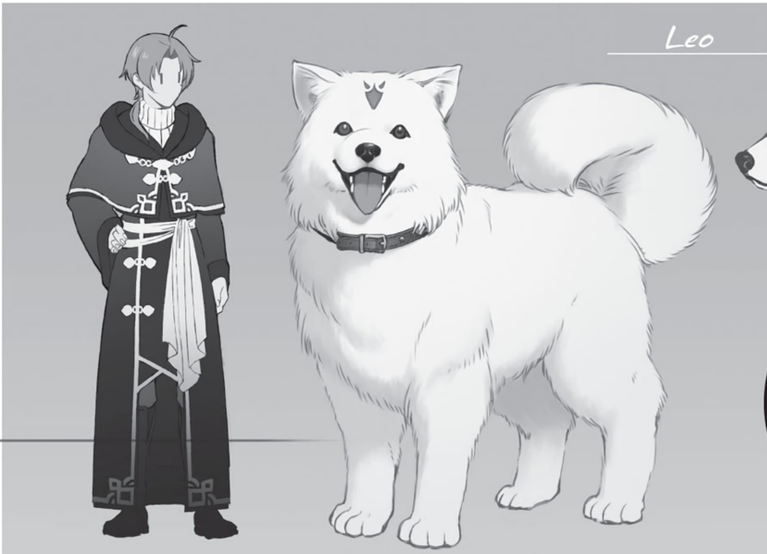
Tristina




Magic circle





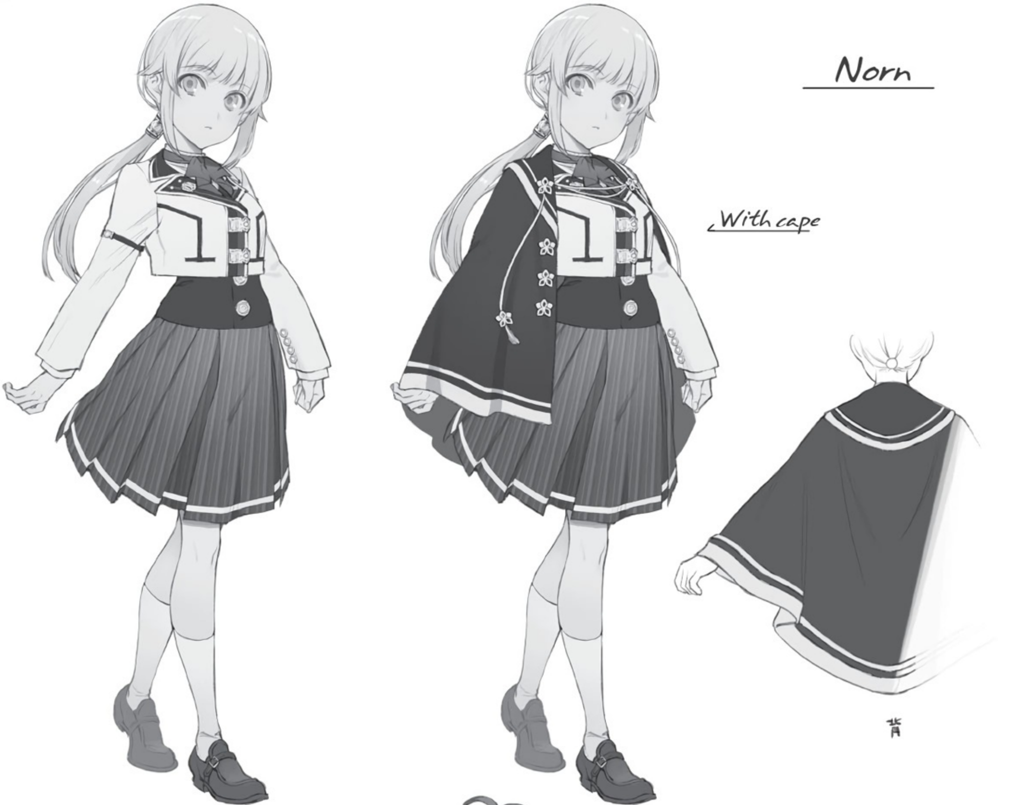


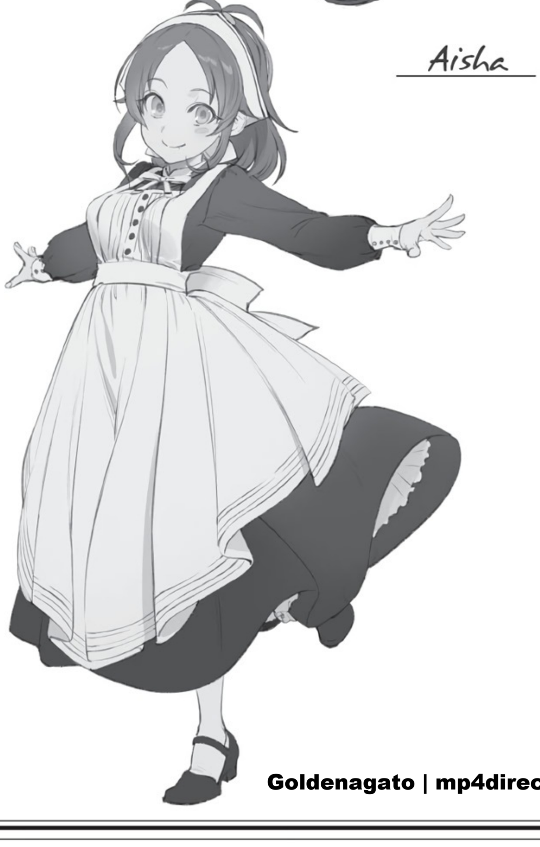
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

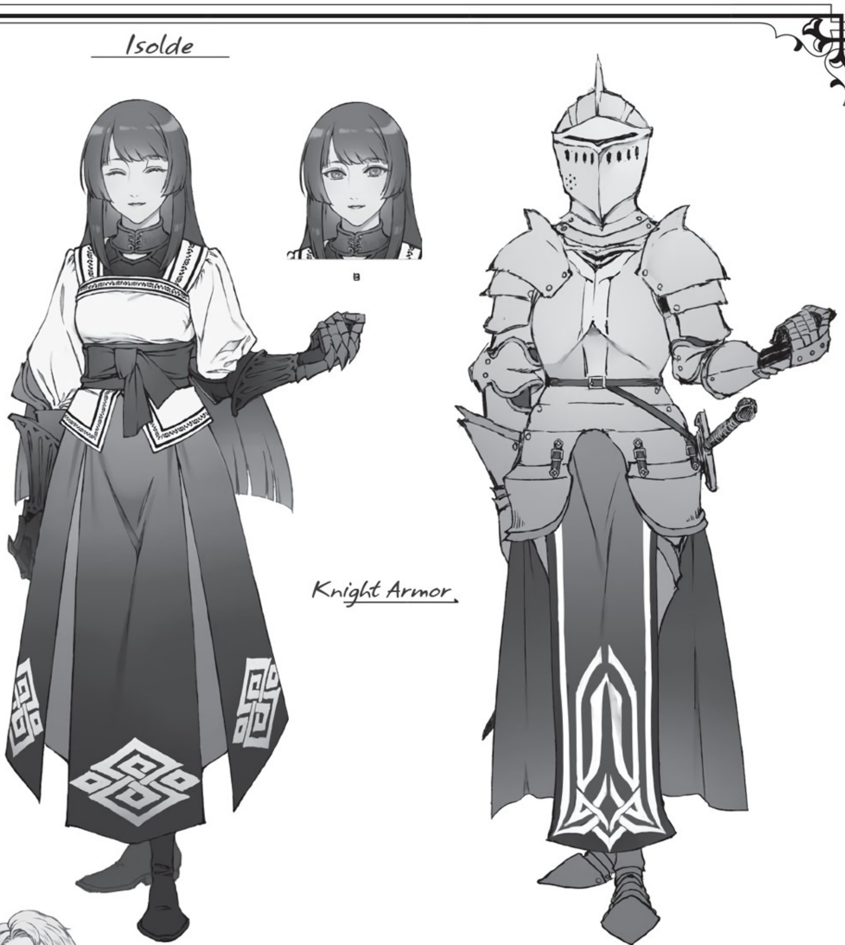
Accessories & Leo

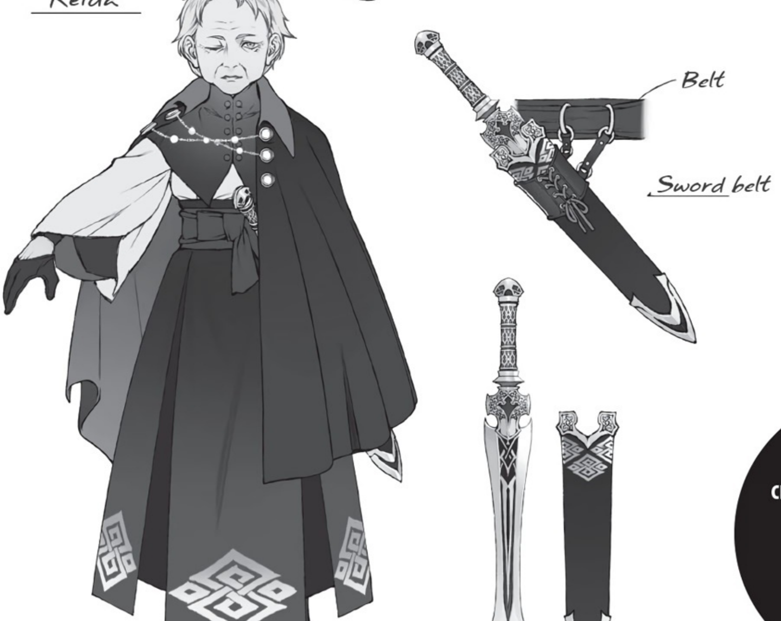
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Norn & Aisha


Norn
With cape
背

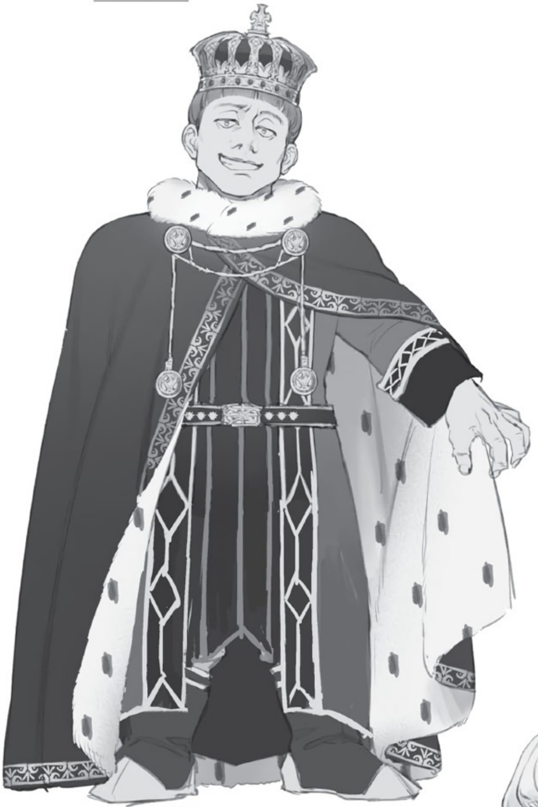


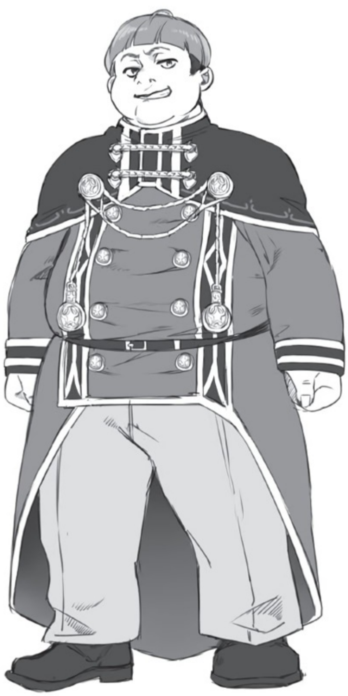

Isolde
Knight Armor

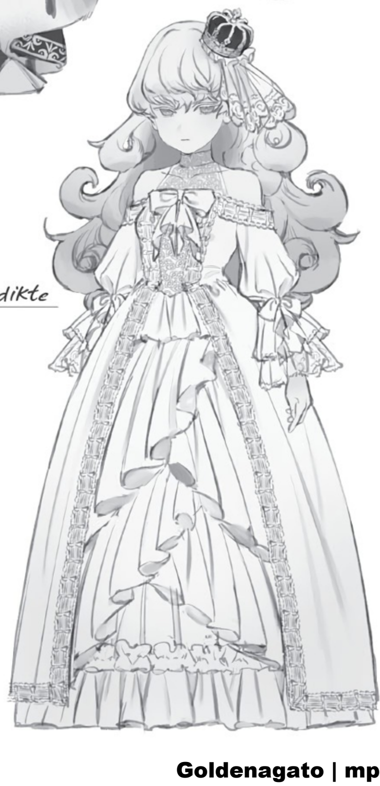

Reida
Belt
Sword belt
Sword

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Reida & Isolde

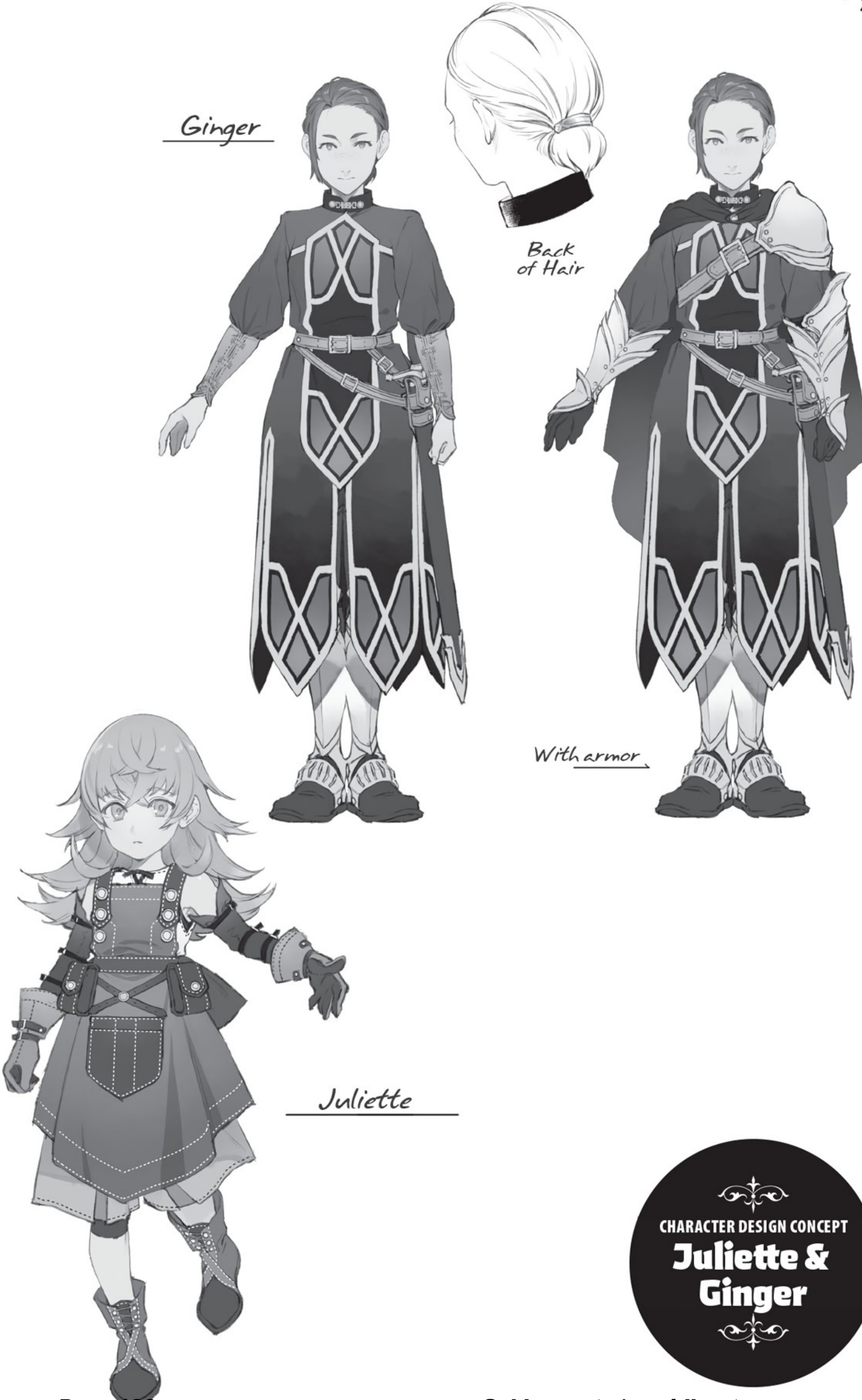






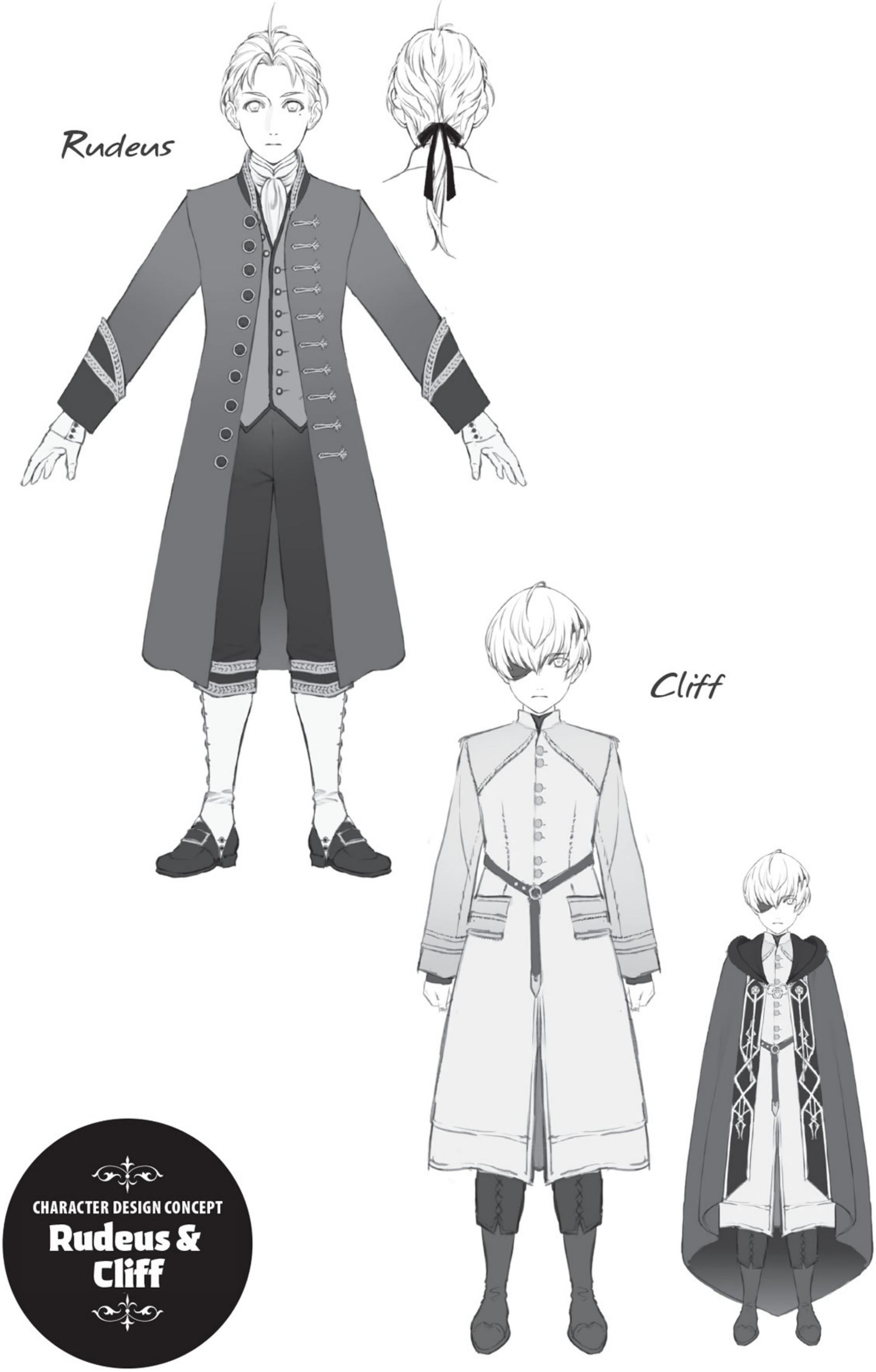
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Pax & Benedikte


Ginger
Back of Hair
With armor
Juliette

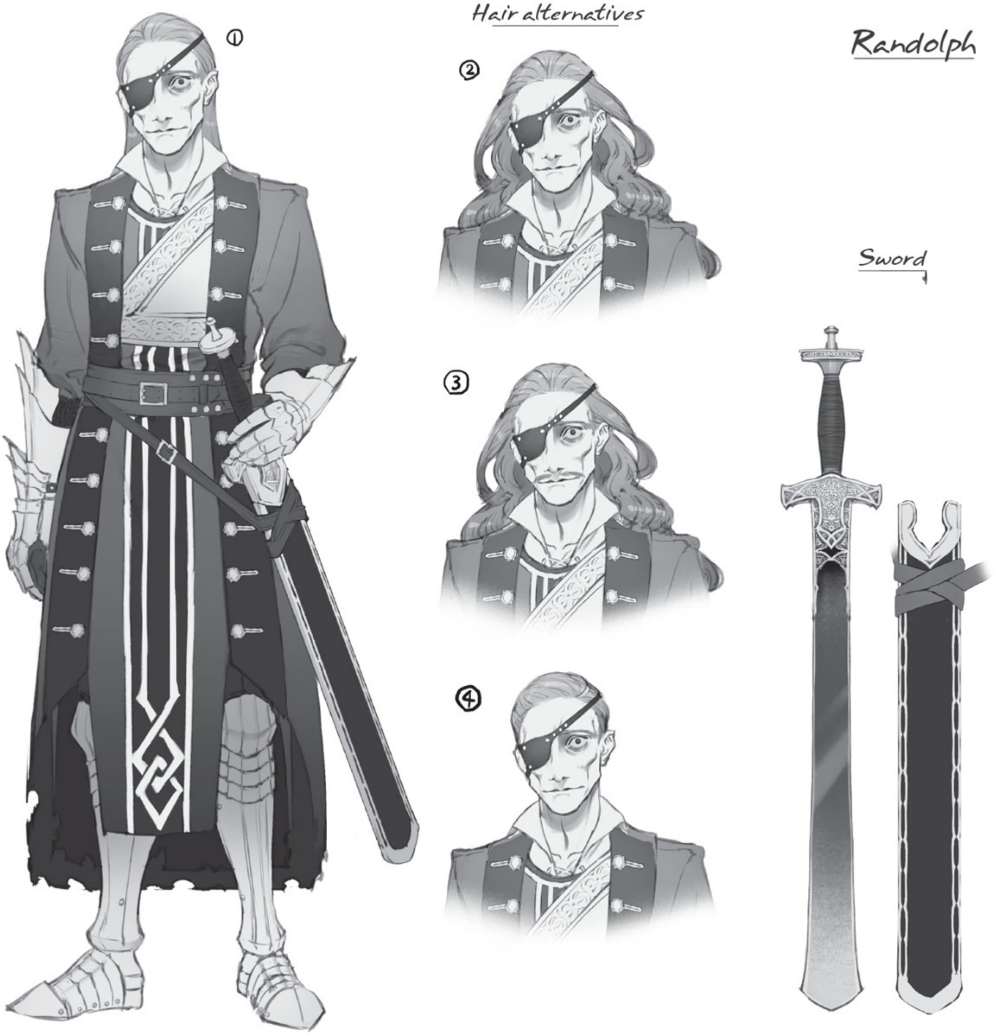
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Juliette & Ginger


Rudeus
Cliff

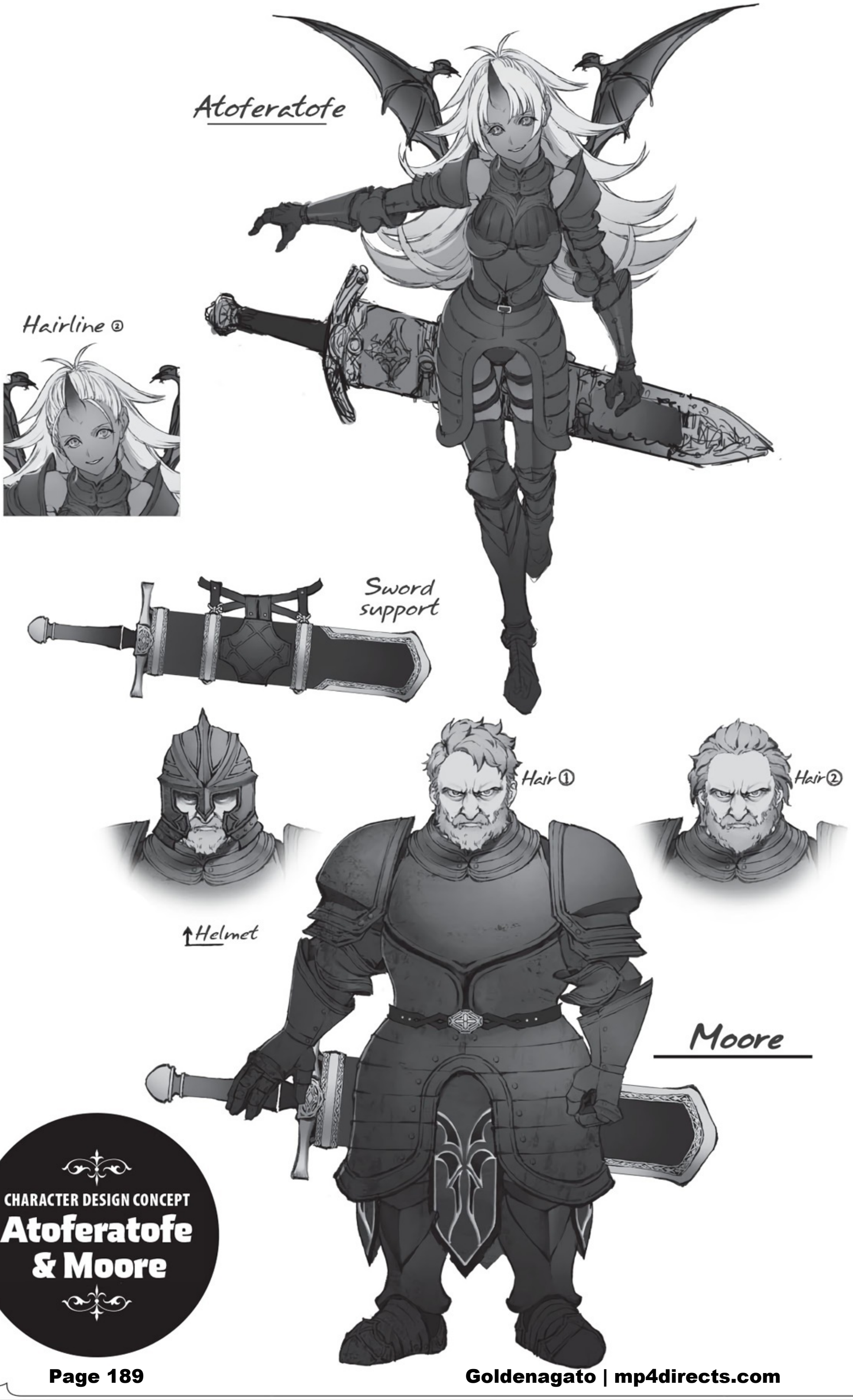
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Rudeus & Cliff


Hair alternatives
Randolph
①
②
③
④
Sword

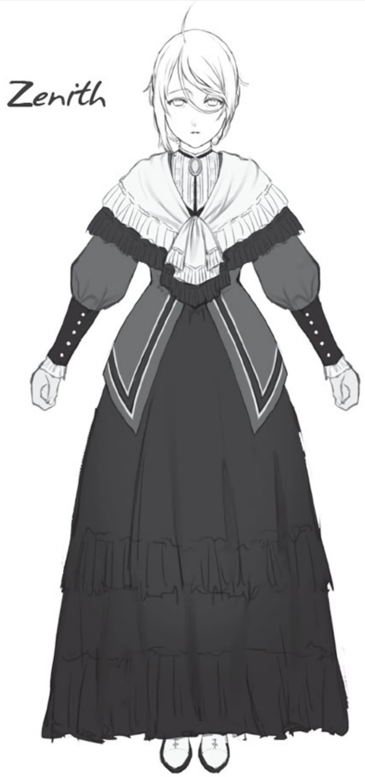
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

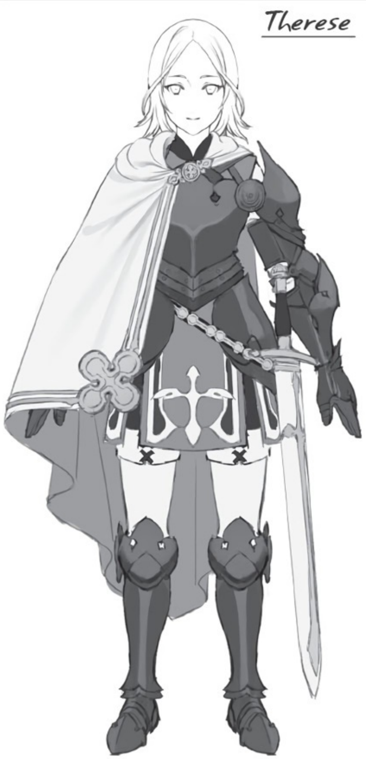
Randolph

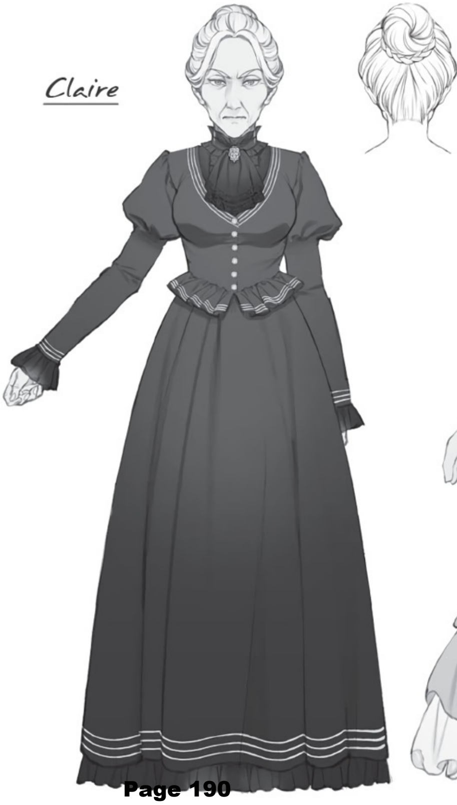

Atoferatofe
Hairline ②
Sword support
Helmet
Hair ①
Hair ②
Moore

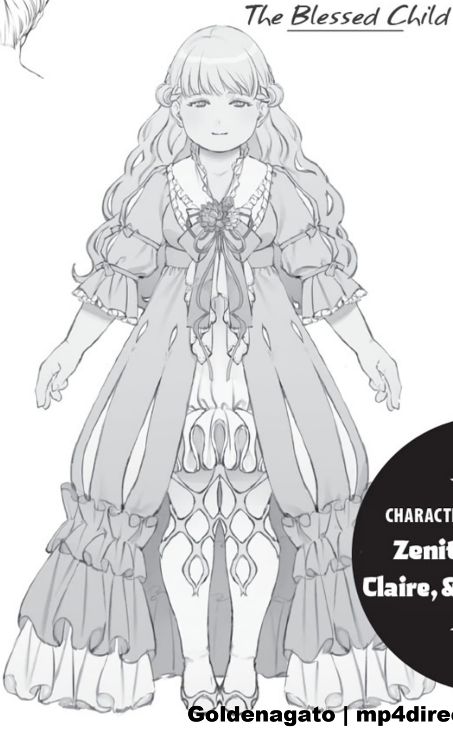
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Atoferatofe & Moore







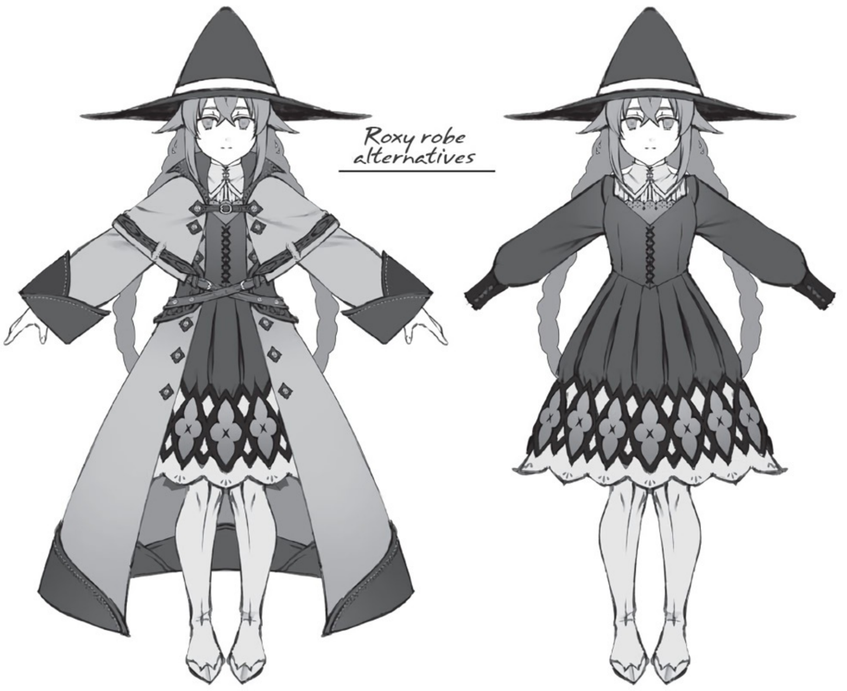

The Blessed Child

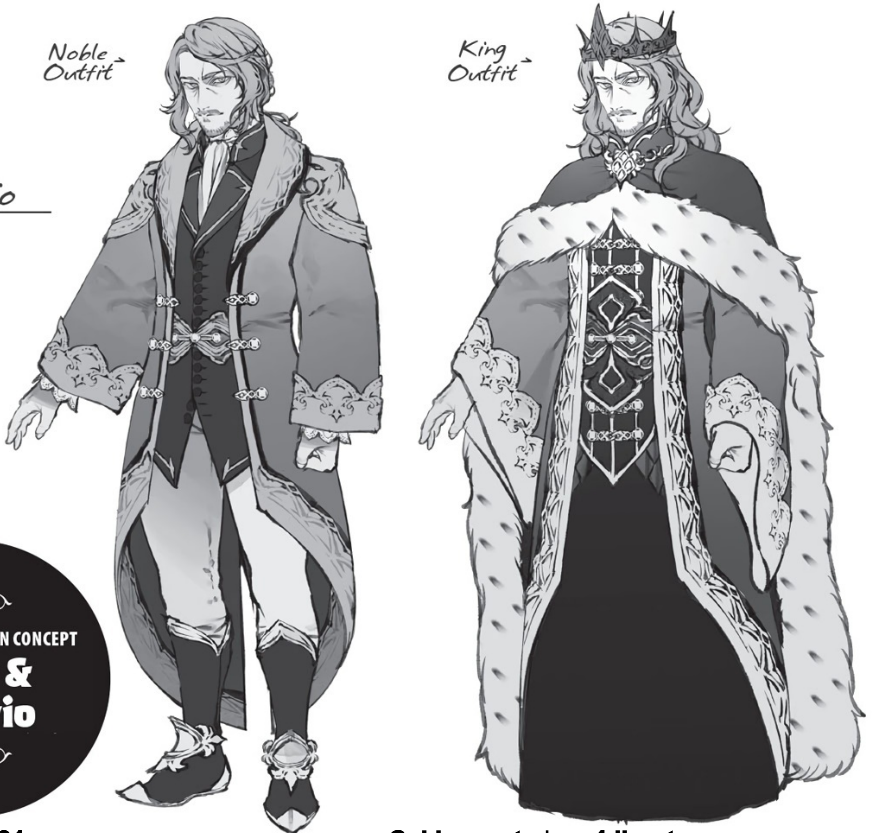
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Zenith, Therese, Claire, & Blessed Child

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

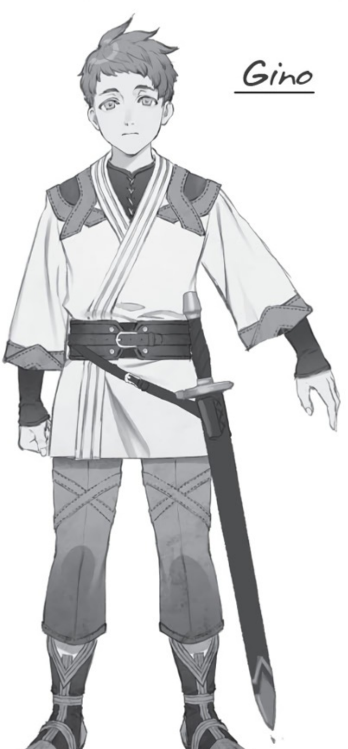
Roxy & Stelvio

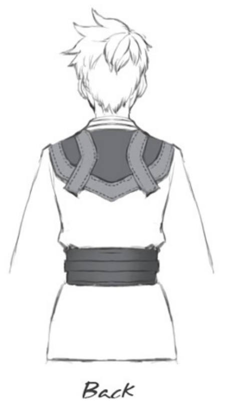

Roxy robe alternatives

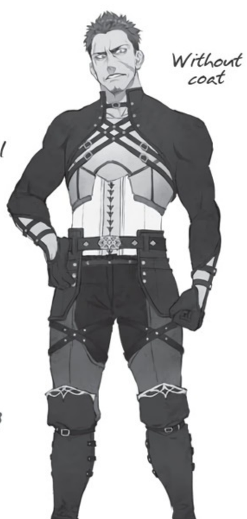

Stelvio
Noble Outfit
King Outfit

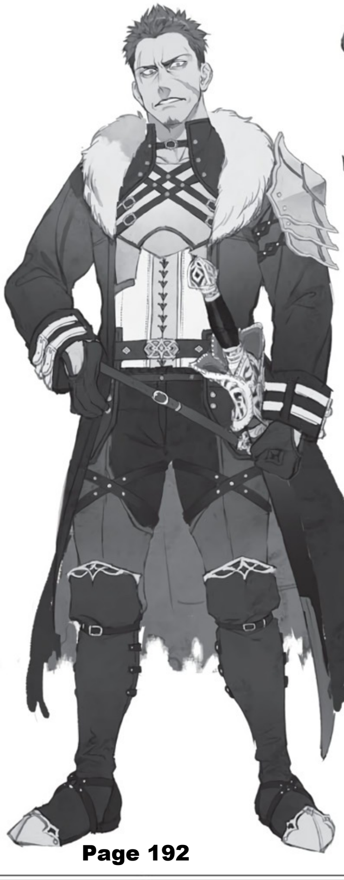
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

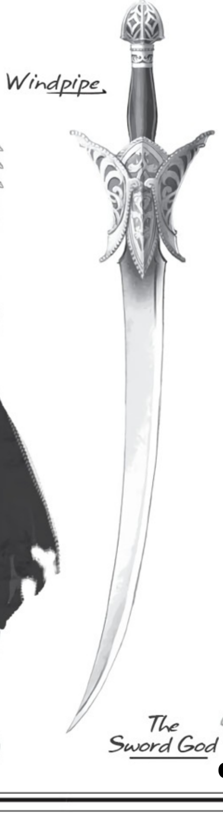
Sword God & Gino

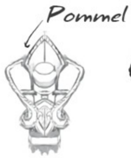


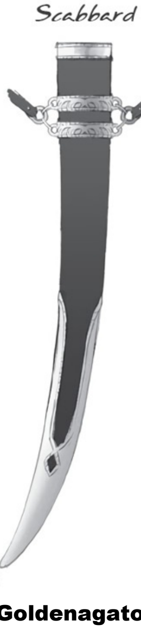



Without coat



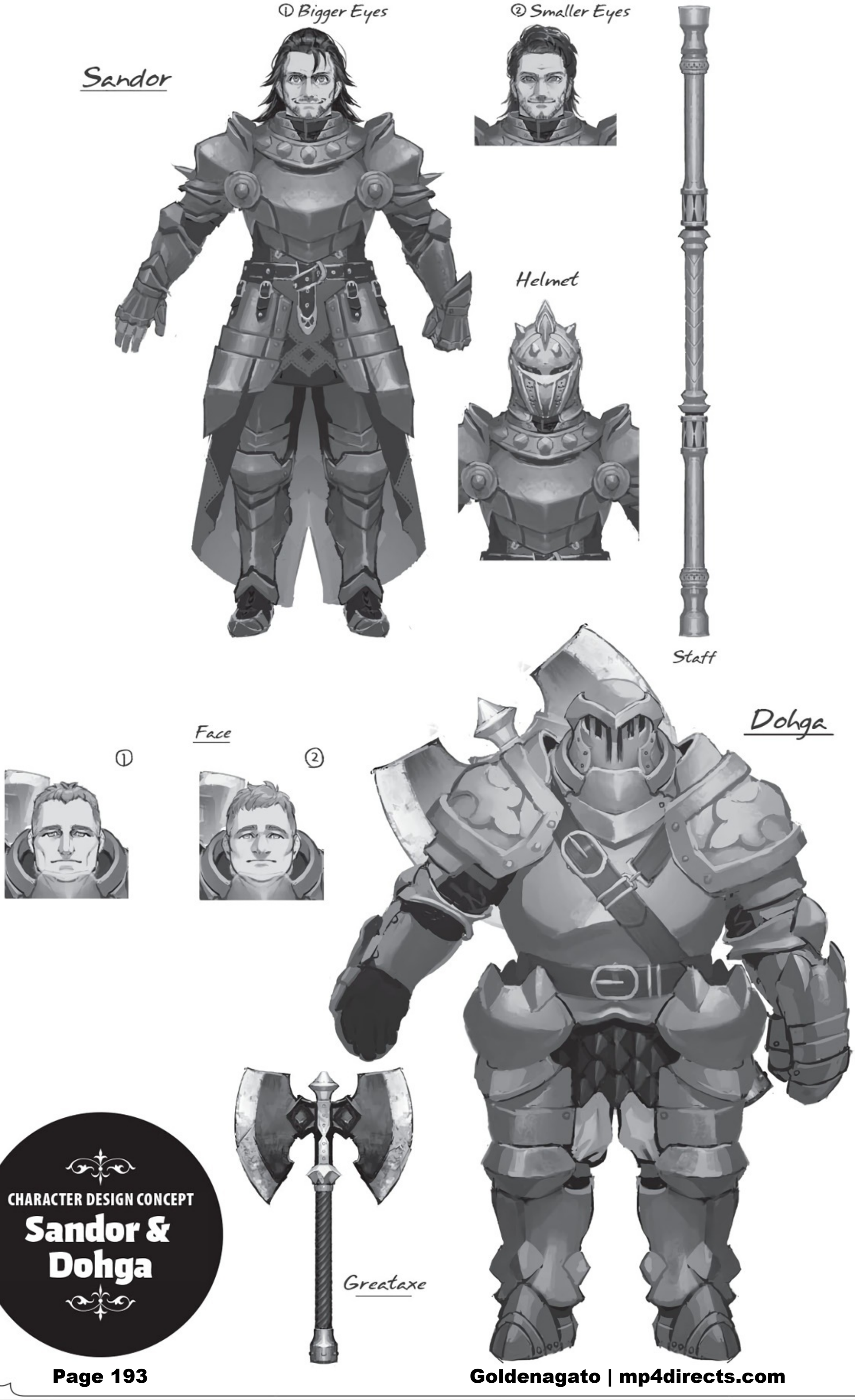

Windpipe
The Sword God



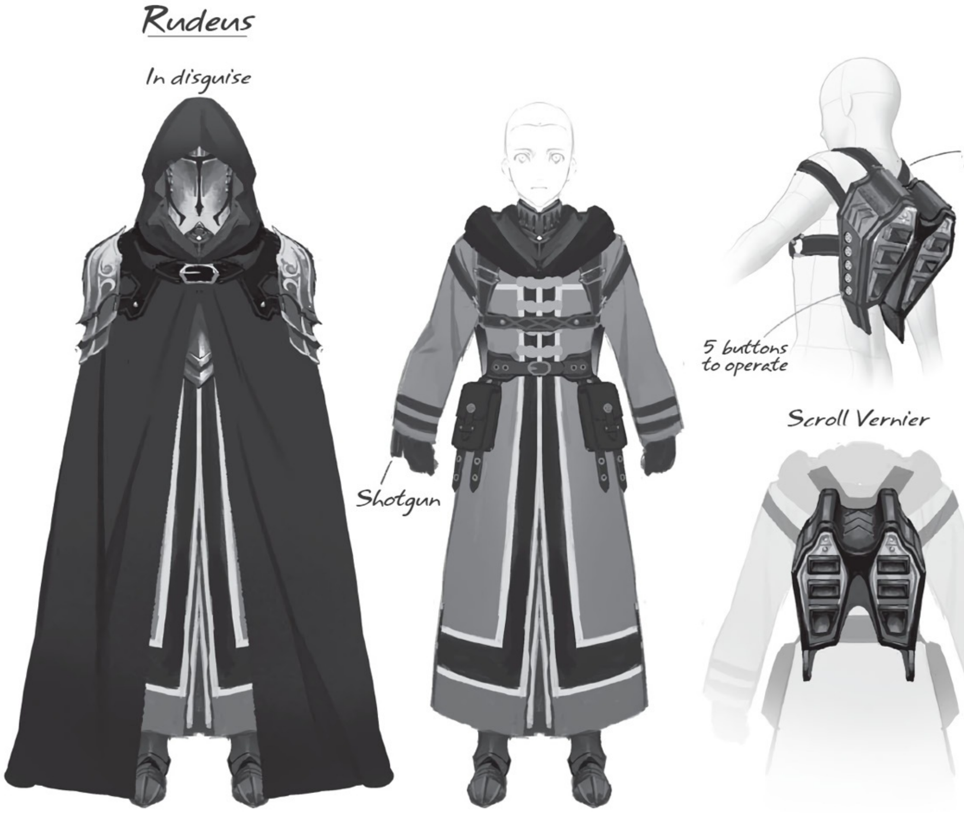


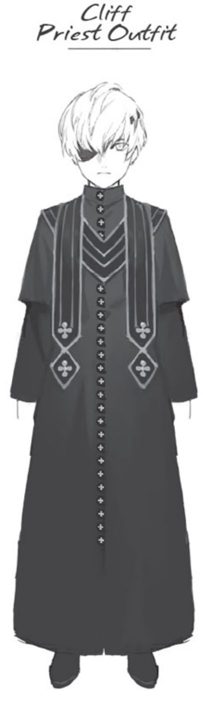
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

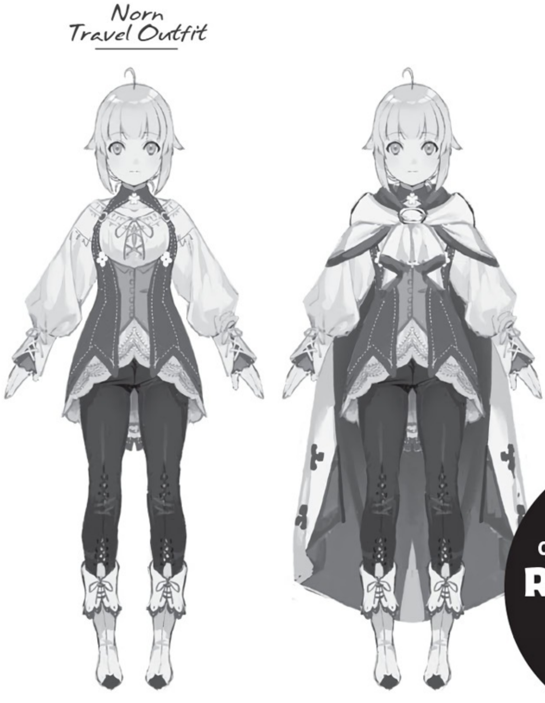
Sandor & Dohga


Sandor
① Bigger Eyes
② Smaller Eyes
Helmet
Staff
Dohga
Face
①
②
Greataxe

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Rudeus, Cliff, & Norn

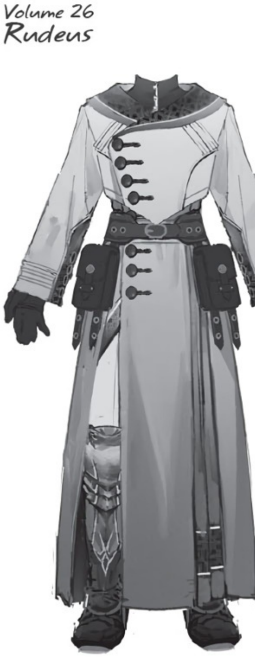

Rudeus
In disguise
Shotgun
Secured with belt
5 buttons to operate
Scroll Vernier

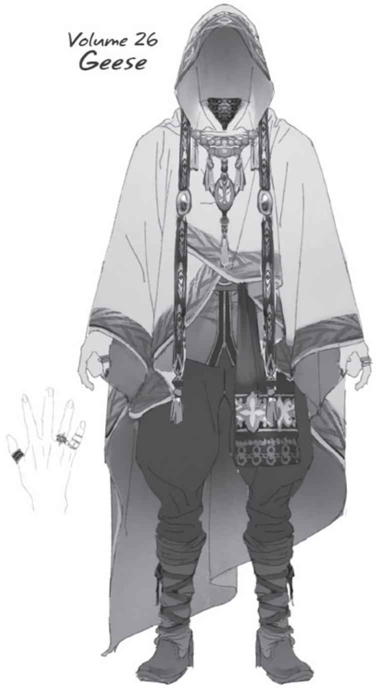

Cliff
Priest Outfit

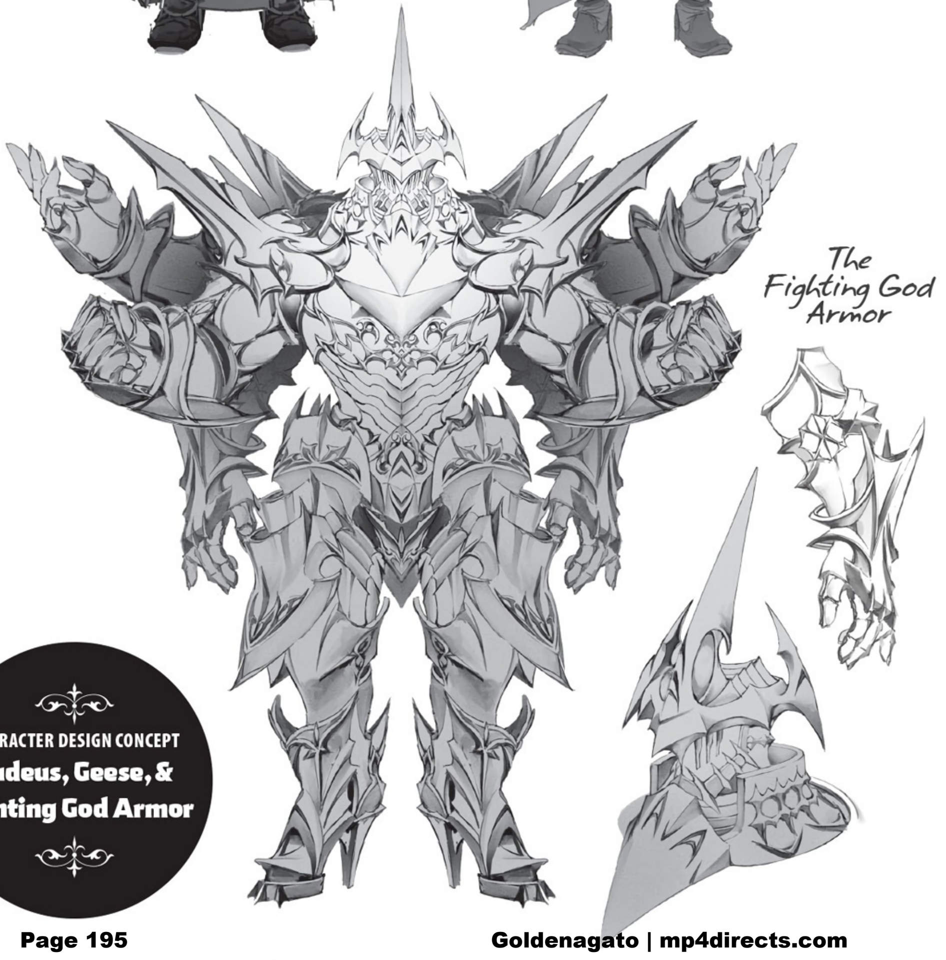

Norn
Travel Outfit

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

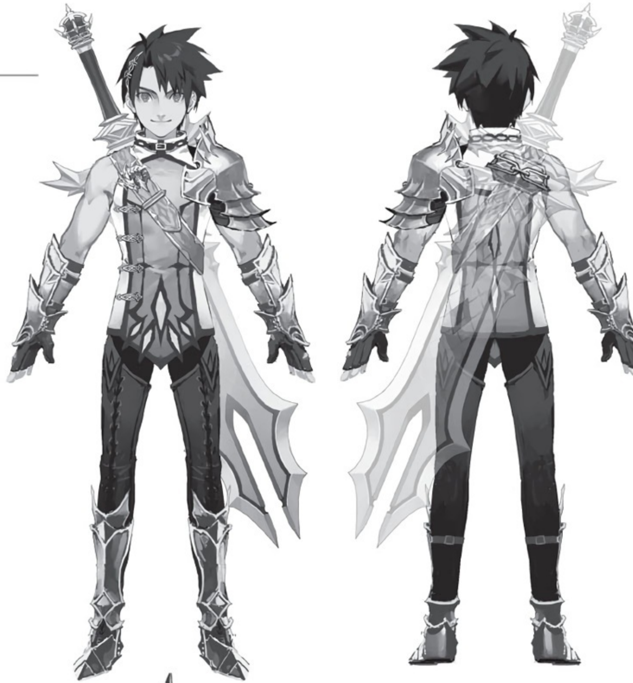
Rudeus, Geese, & Fighting God Armor


Volume 26
Rudeus

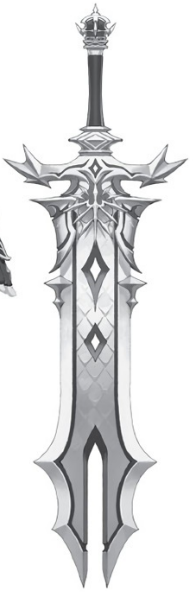

Volume 26
Geese


The Fighting God Armor

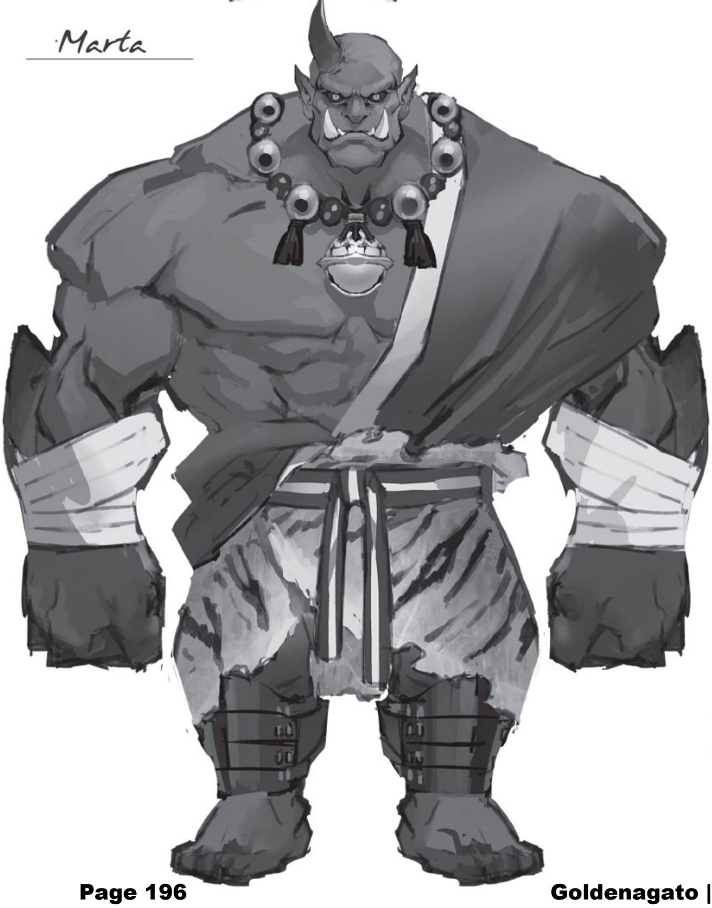
Alec



King Dragon Blade



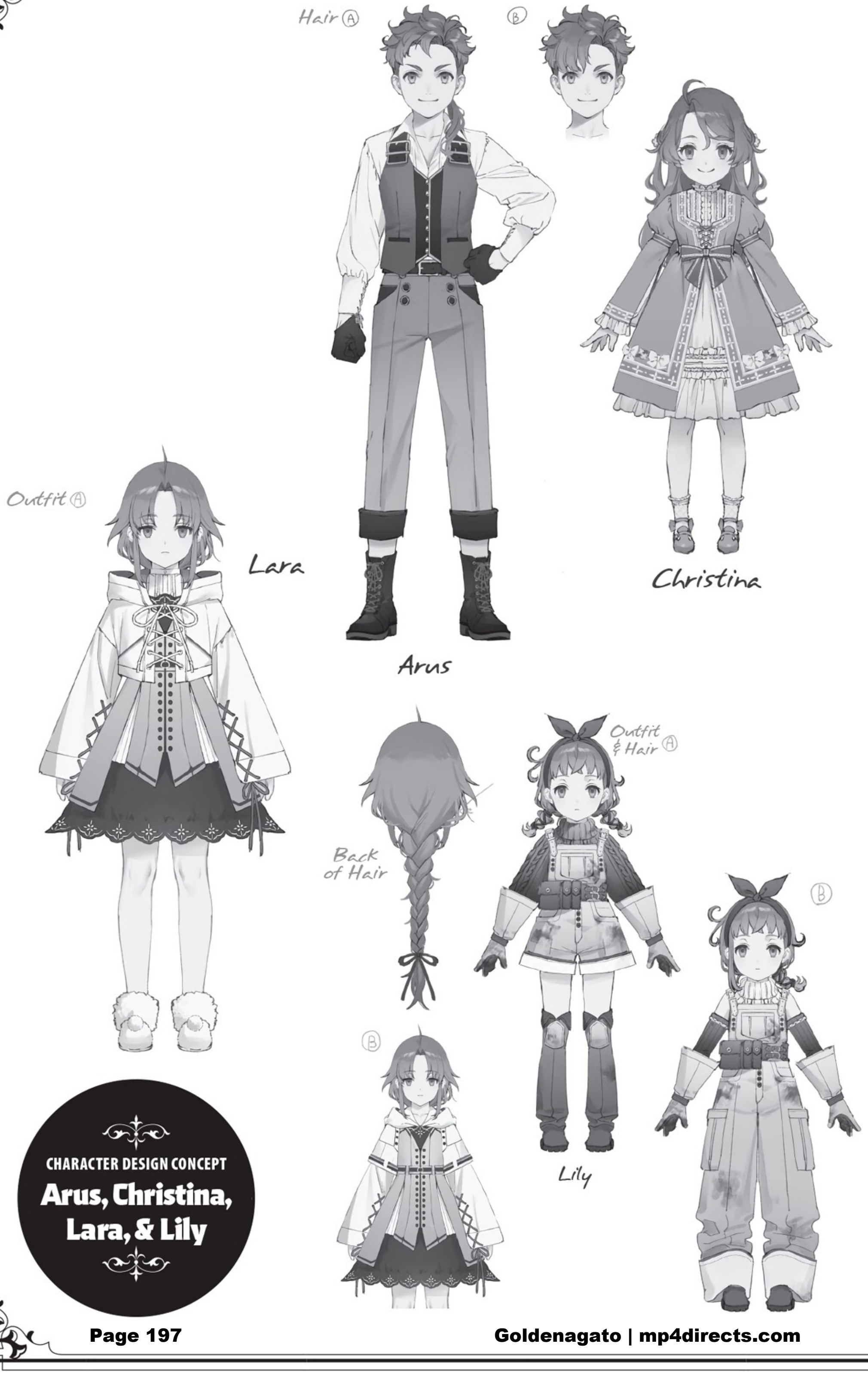
Marta

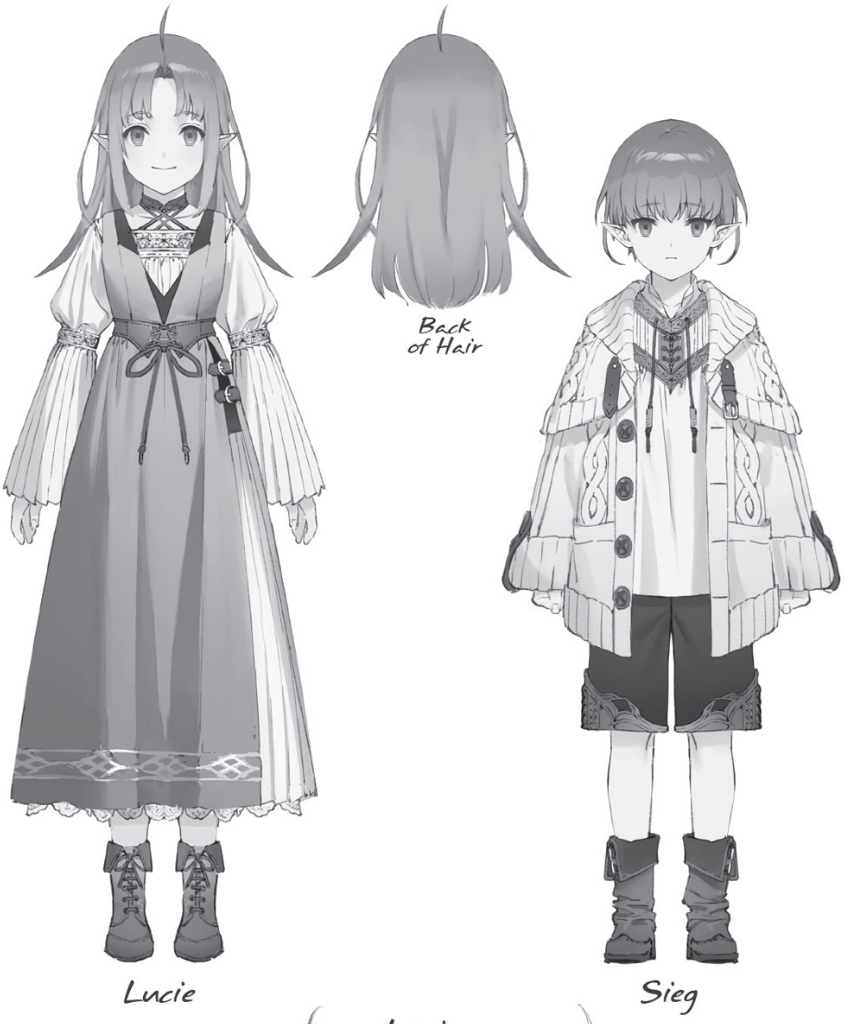


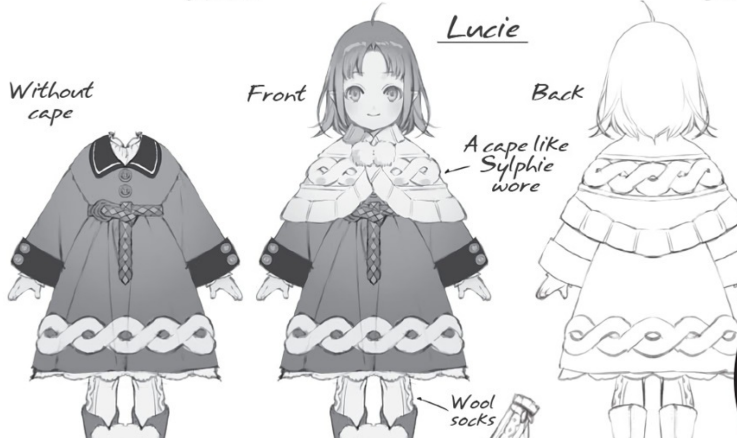
CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Alec & Marta

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT
Arus, Christina, Lara, & Lily


Hair Ⓐ
Ⓑ
Arus
Christina
Outfit Ⓐ
Lara
Back of Hair
Outfit & Hair Ⓐ
Ⓑ
Ⓑ
Lily


Back of Hair
Lucie
Sieg


Lucie
Without cape
Front
Back
A cape like Sylphie wore
Wool socks

CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Lucie & Sieg

About the Author
Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Be Novelists*, they created the webnovel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publishing.

"At long last, the final volume. Thank you for joining me on this journey," said the author.

The epic fight is over, but
their story is far from done!

Mushoku
Tensei

REDUNDANT
REINCARNATION

Novel 1 Coming Soon!

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